

THE MYSTERY OF THE MOTHER WOLF  
When a tame wolf disappears, Nancy pursues a pack of suspects!

# NANCY DREW®

164



CAROLYN KEENE



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# 1

## *A Nasty Neighbor*

“Hey, guys, check this out!” George Fayne said. Her brown eyes sparkled with excitement as she scanned the weather report in the *Montrose Courier* in the baggage claim area of the tiny Montrose airport. “There’s a blizzard coming in tonight, a foot or two of snow. Maybe we’ll get snowed in. Awesome, huh?”

Bess Marvin peered at the newspaper over her cousin’s shoulder. “Awesome? You’ve got to be kidding, George. How am I going to get to a mall? I mean, I didn’t come to Wyoming just to ski.”

Nancy Drew laughed. “I don’t get it, Bess. Why come all this way if you just want to shop? You can shop till you drop in River Heights. Plus, I doubt Montrose even has a mall. According to Alice Marshall, this town is an old-fashioned cowboy town, more like it’s in the nineteenth century than the twenty-first.”

“Three guesses why I came to Wyoming,” Bess teased, throwing Nancy a sly smile.

“Here’s my guess,” George cut in. “Could it be because of those cute cowboy types with great tans from riding the range? Those you can’t get back home.”

Bess shot George a withering look. Turning to Nancy, she said, “I came here in case you need my help, Nan—if you know what I mean.”

Nancy grinned. She knew exactly what Bess meant. Even though she was only eighteen, Nancy was an experienced detective who had solved many difficult mysteries, and her two best friends, George and Bess, were usually there to back her up.

Smoothing back her shoulder-length reddish blond hair, Nancy said, "There's only one problem with that, Bess. Alice Marshall has invited us to stay at Elk River Ranch for a winter ski vacation. As far as I know, she doesn't have a mystery for any of us to solve."

"But that's just so far," Bess countered. "I predict that before the day is out, you'll find some mystery at the ranch—or it will find you, mark my words."

"'Mark my words?'" George repeated, hoisting her skis from the baggage claim rack. "Where'd you get that expression, Bess?"

"From that fortune-teller at the River Heights fair," Bess said, giggling.

"You mean the one who was always wrong?" George said, playfully punching Bess's arm.

Nancy smiled as her friends gently kidded each other. They were so different that sometimes she could hardly believe they were cousins. Tall, dark-haired George was definitely the jock of the family, and blond Bess liked clothes and tempting desserts much more than athletics. Despite their differences, though, George and Bess were close friends.

An attractive red-haired woman hurried into the airport. Her eyes lit up the moment she saw the girls. "Nancy, Bess, George!" she exclaimed. "Sorry I'm late. I was shopping for tonight's dinner and lost track of time. Have you been waiting for ages?"

"Just about five minutes. My suitcase hasn't even come out yet," Nancy replied, giving the woman a warm hug. Standing back, Nancy studied Alice Marshall's pale heart-shaped face and huge green eyes with their gentle, almost innocent expression. Nancy was struck by her youthful appearance. She couldn't believe that Alice was really in her early forties.

After introducing George and Bess to Alice, Nancy added, "Alice Marshall is one of my aunt Eloise's best friends from college."

"I wish I could see more of Eloise, but she lives in New York, and here I am in Wyoming," Alice said regretfully. "I'll have to

lure her out to Elk River Ranch one of these days. It's been several years since she's visited. Anyway, it's so nice to meet you, George and Bess. I've heard a lot about you from Nancy. Welcome to Wyoming."

Fifteen minutes later the three girls were loading Alice's teal-colored Jeep with their skis and suitcases.

Blinking in the bright afternoon sunshine, Nancy said, "I can't believe there's supposed to be a blizzard tonight. The sky is incredibly blue."

"The latest report says the snow may pass us by," Alice said. "Or we may get just a little." Reading the disappointment in George's eyes, Alice added, "Don't worry, George. There's still a ton of snow on the mountains. The skiing has been excellent this year. And who wants such a big storm that we can't even get to the slopes?"

"Well, since you put it that way," George said, brightening, "I guess a little snow is better than too much."

"In Wyoming we have to accommodate our lives to whatever nature decides to dish out," Alice remarked. "But I do hope we don't get a blizzard."

After everyone was comfortably settled in the Jeep, with Alice and Bess in the front seat and George and Nancy in the back, Alice pulled out of the airport driveway onto a narrow road.

The view on all sides was incredible, Nancy thought. For as far as the eye could see, huge snow-covered peaks stretched toward the crystal clear sky. The snow sparkled on the mountains like sequins on white velvet. The sky seemed so close that Nancy felt as if she were sailing through an enormous blue lake made of air.

"Tell us about Elk River Ranch," Nancy prompted Alice, leaning forward. "All I know is that you've got about four hundred acres and Aunt Eloise claims they're all beautiful."

Alice smiled. "That's nice of her to say. My husband, John, and I certainly agree that the ranch is lovely. We've lived here for twenty years and raised our daughter here. We moved to

Wyoming from San Francisco to get away from crowds and to surround ourselves with nature.”

“Aunt Eloise mentioned that you run the ranch as a ski lodge in the winter and a dude ranch in the summer,” Nancy continued. “So I guess we’ll get to experience the ski lodge part.”

“You sure will,” Alice said, driving down the main street of a picturesque village of painted wooden buildings and lantern-lined streets. It reminded Nancy of gold rush towns she had seen in movies. “There are tons of winter sports,” Alice went on. “For instance, downhill skiing at Elk Mountain—a nearby resort—snowshoeing on our ranch land, and dogsledding courtesy of our own husky team. You name it, we’ve got it.”

“What about that extreme sport, the one where you sit in front of a blazing fire and sip hot cocoa?” Bess joked.

Alice laughed. “You’ll have plenty of company for that, Bess, I promise. My daughter, Genevieve—nicknamed Jenny—has just graduated from college. She’s living at home, and her fiancé, Paul, is also staying with us while he works on a zoology project for his graduate degree. He’s making a fifty-acre wolf sanctuary on our land. They both spend a lot of time sitting by the fire, planning the project. I’m sure they’ll be thrilled to have you brainstorm with them.”

“About wolves?” Bess asked doubtfully. “I’m not exactly an expert on the subject.”

“Well, all of you girls are bound to learn something about them after a few days at the ranch,” Alice said, navigating a particularly challenging curve on the now twisty mountain road. “I don’t know whether I mentioned this, Nancy, but John and I have a pet wolf at the ranch.”

A thrill went through Nancy. A wolf at Elk River Ranch! She had always thought wolves were beautiful in zoos and nature movies, but she’d never actually met one in captivity.

“From the moment we bought the ranch, John and I have always had lots of animals around—the more, the merrier,” Alice went on. “We raise cattle, of course, and we own a number of

horses for us and our guests to ride. We have a pet hawk named Beatrice and a favorite husky named Grover. And we enjoy the usual assortment of cats and dogs that any self-respecting ranch owner keeps.”

“Including your very own husky team,” Bess reminded her.

Alice nodded. “Our huskies are lovely, and they’re such hard workers. They pull the dogsled whenever our guests want a ride. But our most interesting pet is the tame wolf, Rainbow. We found her as a three-week-old pup after her mother and litter mates drowned in the Elk River flood four years ago.”

“Her mother drowned?” Bess exclaimed. “How sad!”

“You should have seen her, poor thing,” Alice remarked, sounding like a doting mother herself. “She was tiny, barely able to walk. Mother wolves usually bring their babies out of the den the first time when they’re three to four weeks old. The puppies can’t even see until they’re about two weeks old. For all I know, that might have been Rainbow’s first trip into the outside world. Losing your entire family at that age must have been devastating.”

“You’d never want to go out of your den again,” George commented.

“You wouldn’t,” Alice agreed. “And Rainbow has always been kind of skittish. I understand her timid behavior is typical of a tame wolf’s, but I also wonder if her early life traumatized her and made her even more scared of the world than most wolves are.”

“Is she scared of you?” Nancy asked.

“At first she was,” Alice replied. “But now she loves us—myself, John, Jenny, and now Paul. But she’s extremely shy with other people. Of course, now that she has her puppies, she’s become especially protective.”

“Wolf puppies!” Bess exclaimed. “I bet they’re cute.”

Alice’s green eyes glowed with pride. “They are totally adorable,” she declared. “If you girls are really quiet and Rainbow doesn’t seem too stressed out, it might be okay for you to see them.”

“We’ll be quiet—I promise,” Nancy said. “It’d be great to meet them, but only if that’s okay with Rainbow.”

“We’ll play it by ear,” Alice said. “I know Grover would be cool about having visitors. He’s the father, by the way.”

“Your pet husky?” Nancy asked, surprised that a dog and a wolf could have puppies.

“A lot of people don’t realize that dogs and wolves are so closely related that they can produce puppies,” Alice said. “Wolfdog puppies are really cute, even if they can be kind of wild.”

Just as Nancy was about to ask Alice more about Rainbow’s puppies, a ramshackle house in the middle of a field of rusty junk poking out of the snow appeared on their right. Nancy gaped in astonishment. She’d never seen a junkyard quite so big. Old refrigerators, cars, and tractors half-shrouded in white lay in heaps on about five acres of property, while a scattering of pigs rooted aimlessly among the piles.

A wooden sign in front of the driveway warned passersby, Keep Out, with red paint that dripped from each letter like blood. A skull and crossbones was crudely painted underneath the words.

Before Nancy could ask Alice who lived there, a pudgy, hostile-looking man with gray hair, a long beard, and wearing a dirty barn jacket leaped in front of the Jeep.

Alice screeched on her brakes as the man stared at them, a crazed gleam flickering in his flint gray eyes.

He raised his arms, aiming a slingshot straight at the windshield of their car!



## 2

### *Elk River Ranch*

Alice and Bess ducked, leaving Nancy and George exposed in the backseat. The rock inside the slingshot's elastic pouch glistened.

"Get down girls!" Alice yelled, her voice muffled by the dashboard and front seat. "He's going to shoot that thing any second!"

Bending her head toward her knees, Nancy sneaked a peek at the man. He was grinning at them, jumping up and down, obviously enjoying every moment of discomfort he was causing them. Then, for no apparent reason, he lowered his weapon and jogged over to Alice's window.

The man rapped rudely on the glass, and Alice raised her head, her eyes wide with fright. The sprinkling of freckles on her nose stood out against her milk white skin.

Laughing in an eerie, high-pitched tone, the man made a mocking gesture toward the road, as if he were kindly allowing them to proceed. Without waiting another second, Alice floored the accelerator, and the Jeep peeled away.

"Do you know that guy, Alice?" Bess asked, her blue eyes pools of fear as she cautiously raised her head. "I hope he's not one of your neighbors."

"Unfortunately, Rusty is our nearest neighbor," Alice replied, her voice trembling. "But I wish he lived on the other side of the world. He's a hermit, and he doesn't want anyone to bug him. But he delights in bugging everyone else."

"Rusty?" Nancy repeated. "His name seems to fit all that junk he's got in his yard."

Alice laughed hollowly. "Rusty Marconi's nickname does come from all that junk. No one around here is even sure what his real first name is."

"I take it he's kind of a tough character," George said dryly.

"'Tough' doesn't begin to describe him," Alice explained. "Even though we can't see his property from our house, it borders our land on one side and makes this approach to Elk River Ranch look pretty awful."

"Does it discourage people from staying at the lodge?" Bess asked, smoothing her long blond hair.

"I think it must," Alice answered. "I mean, we've never had a problem keeping the lodge full because it's such a nice place to stay and we don't have that many guest rooms. Still, I have the feeling that Rusty's junk so near the ranch might discourage guests. Most people want to come to Wyoming to take in its gorgeous untouched beauty, and they have to be turned off by Rusty's place. Our guests have been too polite to speak negatively about it, but they are shocked by how much junk he's collected over the years. The place is an environmental disaster."

"Have you tried to get him to clean it up?" Nancy asked.

"Oh, yes," Alice said. "The first few years we lived here, we asked him to clean it up several times, and we were always very diplomatic. But when a nice approach got us nowhere, we went to the Montrose town council and asked them to help. Unfortunately, they can do very little, because there's no law against keeping junk in your yard. And our complaints only made Rusty more hostile because he resented being told what to do with his property."

"But the community has to have some rights, too, doesn't it?" Nancy asked. "I mean, it's not fair for one crazy guy to be able to hurt everyone's enjoyment of the area and make it harder for you to rent out rooms. Plus, all that stuff he has probably isn't good for the land. Old gasoline from his broken-down cars might seep into the water system."

"You're sounding very logical, Nancy," Alice said with a sigh, "but Rusty doesn't respond to logic. Things have gotten so bad

with him that he taunts us all the time. That little antic you girls just witnessed is a perfect example.” Alice frowned as she searched for her next words, then added, “Somehow, his behavior has become more sinister lately.”

Nancy bit her lip. Alice and John must not have been thrilled to move to Wyoming to get away from a crowded city only to find a very unpleasant man practically living in their backyard.

Alice slowed down as she navigated a sharp curve in the road. A driveway opened suddenly on the right, with a green-and-white sign nailed to an open gate. A drawing of an elk appeared on the sign above the words Elk River Ranch.

After turning into the driveway, Alice drove up a long avenue of pine trees. A quarter of a mile later, the pines opened onto wide fields where herds of cattle stood in knee-deep snow, huddled together for warmth. Then the cattle range changed to a horse pasture enclosed by a post-and-rail fence. Inside were six horses in an assortment of colors: bay, chestnut, gray, black, roan, and palomino. Steamy breath rose from the horses’ nostrils into the cold blue air.

As the Jeep reached the top of a slope, the lodge appeared at the end of a huge snow-covered lawn. It was a large, handsome, two-story log building with a wraparound porch that had railings made of white birch. Lamplight glowed from several windows, looking to Nancy like friendly eyes welcoming the travelers in from the cold.

“Well, here we are, girls,” Alice announced. “Elk River Ranch itself.”

After unloading her suitcase and skis from the Jeep, Nancy stood on the porch for a moment, taking in her surroundings. On either side of the lawn, gorgeous pine forests stretched into the dark, mysterious wilderness. Craggy mountains rose beyond those, while in front of the house a river unfolded like a golden ribbon in the valley below, reflecting the lowering sun.

Two red bams and an unpainted wooden structure on the left completed the picture of this ranch far removed from the world’s hustle and bustle.

Stamping the snow off her feet on the front doormat, Alice opened the door of the lodge. A handsome gray-and-white husky with one blue eye and one brown eye bounded outside. Wagging his tail furiously, he sniffed the girls.

"Stop that, Grover boy, don't be rude," Alice told him, taking hold of his collar as she tried to drag him back inside. "These are our new friends, Nancy, Bess, and George." Grover looked at the girls beseechingly before scurrying in through the door.

Bess giggled. "What a friendly personality he has," she declared. "He looked as if he wanted to invite us inside."

"Grover loves visitors," Alice said. "Unfortunately, he's got so much love in him, he's not much of a watchdog." Shrugging, she added, "Though we don't really need a watchdog in paradise."

A tall, robust man in his late sixties stepped outside the front door. When he saw the new arrivals, his mouth curved up into a delighted smile.

"You must be Nancy, George, and Bess," he said heartily, extending his hand for each girl to shake. "I've heard so much about you from Alice. Now, let me guess who's who."

After he identified each girl correctly, Alice excused herself to do some household chores before preparing afternoon tea.

George asked, "So, are you John Marshall?"

The man chuckled. "No, I'm Dody Warriner, a guest at the lodge. But I'm flattered that you mistook me for John, since he's probably twenty-five years my junior."

Nancy studied Mr. Warriner as he helped them carry their bags inside the lodge. He looked amazingly fit for his age, as if he spent all his time skiing or sailing. His twinkling blue eyes were striking in his tanned face, and he moved with a spring in his step. Even so, Nancy thought, he looks as if he wouldn't turn down a good meal, judging from the snug fit of his trousers.

Once inside the living room, Nancy took it in curiously. The room was enormous, as deep and wide as a barn. A cheerful fire blazed inside a huge stone fireplace, and beautiful Oriental carpets with rich colors and intricate designs decorated the floors. A number of antique sofas and armchairs with luxurious



velvet cushions invited guests to recline, read, talk, or play a variety of board games stacked on tables around the room. Lamps topped with fringed and tasseled shades bestowed a soft golden glow, and a mounted elk's head gazed down loftily from its perch above the fireplace.

A young, brown-haired guy around nineteen or twenty popped up from the sofa in front of the fire. When he saw the girls, he tucked his chin down shyly, then glanced up at them with soft brown doe eyes.

"This is my son, Dexter," Dody explained. "He's a little shy with girls."

Dexter blushed bright scarlet under his tan. "Oh, Dad," he said, sounding extremely irritated. He immediately sank back into the sofa, disappearing behind its high back.

"I wasn't expecting someone as cute as him to be here," Bess whispered to Nancy. "But I don't blame him for being annoyed at his father. I wonder if he'll ever get up the guts to talk to us after being embarrassed like that."

"I'm sure you'll find a way to draw him out," Nancy told Bess in a low voice.

"Dexter and I have just finished some terrific skiing today," Dody explained. "The slopes got a fresh coat of powder last night, and the sky was so clear, I could see for miles. My wife would rather stay in San Francisco and shop, but I'm addicted to the outdoor life. Thank goodness Dexter likes to come with me, so I don't have to ski by myself."

Nancy didn't think that a gregarious man like Dody Warriner would have trouble finding people to ski with him, but she was glad Dexter had come along. She liked the idea of having a new person around, and Dexter seemed like a nice guy.

A broad-shouldered man with jet-black hair entered the room, his arms full of firewood. Nancy judged him to be in his early forties. He wore blue jeans and a flannel shirt of gray and blue plaid, which accentuated his pale gray eyes. He gazed quietly at the newcomers before turning to place the wood on

the fire. Once finished, he turned back to the girls and shook hands.

“Hello, there, I’m John Marshall, Alice’s husband,” he announced.

The moment the girls introduced themselves, John’s gaze wandered toward a far doorway. “Excuse me. I have work to do,” he said bluntly. “I’m the cook in this joint.” His mouth curved into a tight smile before leaving the guests to themselves.

“Alice and John are so different,” Nancy commented to Dody in a low voice. “She’s so sweet and friendly, and he’s so gruff.”

“Well, you know the expression—opposites attract,” Dody said with a shrug.

Grinning mischievously, Bess cupped her hand against Nancy’s ear and murmured, “Speaking of opposites attracting, I’m going to challenge Dexter to a game of backgammon.”

“Hey, girls,” Alice said, hurrying up to them with a steaming pot of tea and a plate of brownies on a tray. “I’m sorry, I had to abandon you to prepare afternoon tea, which I dutifully promise to all our guests. Anyway, I’ve got a free moment now. Why don’t I show you to your rooms?”

“I’m going to do some laps in the heated pool,” Dody announced. “That way I’ll feel I’ve earned my brownies.”

Nancy and George followed Alice while Bess slid over to Dexter’s sofa. “Don’t worry, guys,” Bess told Nancy and George, “I’ll find our room later. Right now a cup of tea and a brownie sounds great.”

After putting their skis and boots in the downstairs sports equipment closet, Nancy and George picked up their suitcases and followed Alice up a large staircase made of dark polished wood. On the second floor, six doors opened off a wide hallway with a large window facing the river, through which the setting sun poured a stream of light.

Alice led them to two doors at the front of the hall. “We’ve only got two extra rooms, so two of you girls will have to double up,” she said. “Jenny and Paul have the two rooms facing each other at the back of the hall, then Dody and Dexter have the

next two rooms, and you girls are in these two at the front. John and I have our own suite downstairs in a wing of the house.”

“George, why don’t you and I share?” Nancy suggested. “Bess will like having her own bathroom, anyway, so she won’t feel rushed with her make-up.”

“Good point, Nan,” George said, following Alice into the room.

As the sun slid farther down the horizon, a beam of sunlight shot through the window like a laser, lighting up the corner of the hall. A small reddish object there caught Nancy’s eye.

She stepped to the corner and stooped down. It was a red Swiss army knife with two crudely etched letters, *RM*, marking its surface.

Nancy’s mind flashed back to Alice’s description of Rusty. Hadn’t she said his last name was Marconi?

Nancy thought for a moment. She couldn’t think of anyone staying at Elk River Ranch who had those initials. Was Rusty Marconi stalking the Marshalls inside their own house?

### 3

## *Crash!*

“Alice?” Nancy said, following Alice and George into the bedroom. “I found this Swiss army knife in the corner of the hallway. It says *RM* on it, and I thought the *M* might stand for *Marshall*. But who in your family has the first initial *R*?”

Alice took the knife from Nancy and studied it. “No one. I have no idea who this belongs to.”

“There’s no way it could be Rusty Marconi’s, could it?” Nancy asked her.

Alice stared at her, alarm spreading through her light green eyes. “What an awful thought, Nancy. No, it couldn’t possibly be his. He may be a weird old coot who’s territorial about his own property, but he wouldn’t stalk us on *ours*. At least, I don’t think he would.” A sudden look of relief flashed across her face as she cried, “I know! This knife must belong to Ross Minkowski, our ranch hand. Thank goodness I remembered him—the thought that the knife could be Rusty’s really gave me the creeps.”

“Me, too,” Nancy said, feeling much easier. “You wouldn’t want that guy in your house.”

“No way,” George chimed in. “He’s bad enough a mile down the road.”

“Well, girls, I’ll leave you to unpack,” Alice said. “But please come down for tea when you’re finished. Relaxing by our fire on a late winter afternoon can be very pleasant.”

After promising to join everyone later, Nancy and George lifted their suitcases onto the luggage racks at the foot of their twin canopy beds and began to unpack. The room’s walls were decorated with an assortment of eccentric items, including



prints of Montrose when it was a nineteenth-century Wild West town, and a pair of old-fashioned snowshoes. Brightly colored Navajo rugs adorned the floors.

"This place is great," George commented as she hung up her blue ski parka. "It's really got the atmosphere of an old-time western ranch."

"The only problem with it is Rusty Marconi," Nancy said. "I'm thinking that Alice should tell the police he threatened her with a slingshot."

"Aiming a rock at someone is serious stuff," George said. "Calling the police wouldn't be a bad idea."

"Let's tell her," Nancy said. "Maybe after dinner, when she isn't so busy."

Ten minutes later Nancy and George were sitting by the fire, munching brownies as they set up a Monopoly game. "Hi there," came a voice from above them. Looking up, Nancy saw a young woman with wire-rimmed glasses, freckles, and curly light brown hair standing beside her and George. She wore blue jeans and a blue sweater with a snowflake pattern around the collar. "I bet you guys are Nancy and George. I've already met Bess." She nodded in the direction of Bess and Dexter, who were deeply involved in a backgammon game, oblivious to the rest of the world. "I'm Jenny Marshall. I don't know if my mom told you, but I just graduated from college and I'm living at home trying to decide what to do with the rest of my life."

Nancy laughed. "I'm Nancy Drew, and this is George Fayne," she said, drawn to Jenny's friendly, happy-go-lucky manner.

"My fiancé, Paul Ferrier, is lurking around here somewhere," Jenny explained. "He's living at the ranch while he works on a graduate school project, so you're bound to meet him eventually."

"Are you talking about me again, Jenny?" a man's voice said behind Nancy. The three girls turned to see a young man walking toward them from a hallway off the living room. He looks a lot like Jenny, Nancy thought, with his pug nose, curly blond hair, and easygoing smile.

“Don’t be paranoid, Paul,” Jenny teased. “You know I only say good things about you. Anyway, this is Nancy Drew and George Fayne. I know you’ve already met Bess.”

After Paul shook hands with the two girls, George said, “You and Jenny probably hear this a lot, but you guys look enough alike to be brother and sister.”

Jenny laughed. “It’s true—a lot of people say that.”

“When Jenny and I get married and have kids,” Paul added, “we won’t have arguments about who the kids look like. If they look like Jenny, they’ll also look like me.”

“So when are you planning to get married?” Nancy asked.

“Probably June,” Jenny said. Glancing at Paul, she added, “Paul wants to finish up his project before focusing on the wedding. We hope the project will be done by spring.”

“What’s the project?” George asked.

Paul smiled. “I was hoping you’d ask,” he said eagerly. “This project is so interesting that I love talking about it every chance I get. I’m creating a sanctuary for injured wolves who are found in the wild, plus a wolf education center for the public.”

“Awesome,” Nancy said. “Were wolves your specialty in school?”

“Sure were,” Paul told her. “I’ve been fascinated by them—probably from the first time I read *Little Red Riding Hood* or *The Three Little Pigs*.”

Bess giggled from her armchair, craning her head to hear the conversation. “But you weren’t supposed to like those wolves. Most kids were scared of them.”

Paul’s hazel eyes grew serious. “Part of the reason people are so frightened of wolves is because of the stories we learned as kids,” he said earnestly. “It’s a shame, though. We’ve killed a lot of them because of our fear, and now they’re endangered. But they’re more scared of us than we are of them. At graduate school I often worked hands-on with wolves and never felt afraid.”

“Are you getting a degree in biology?” George asked.

“Zoology, which is the study of animals,” Paul explained. “I’ve done all my course work, but I have to complete this project before I can get my degree.”

“Is that where you guys met?” Bess asked. “At college?”

“Actually, no,” Jenny replied. “We met as kids in Montrose when Paul spent summers here visiting his grandmother. She owns Coyote Corners, a nearby ranch.”

Paul glanced fondly at Jenny as he said, “Jenny and I ran into each other again two summers ago when I was visiting Grandma. We started seeing each other, and the rest is history.”

“So when Paul told me that he wanted to make a wolf sanctuary and education center for his Ph.D. project, I suggested that he do it here,” Jenny said. “My family is crazy about wolves, you know.”

“So what’s the wolf sanctuary going to be like?” Dexter asked, glancing up from the backgammon board. “You say it’s for injured wolves?”

“Yes,” Paul said. “It’s going to be fifty acres of fenced-in land where they can roam as if they were free. But because these wolves will all have been injured, they would have a hard time surviving in the wild.”

“So the public will come here to see them?” Nancy asked.

“One day a week,” Paul said. “Alice and John wouldn’t want people around all the time. Visitors will be able to observe the wolves from behind a fence, and then they can visit the education center and learn even more about them.”

“Speaking of wolves,” Jenny said, “would you guys be interested in meeting some of our animals? I’m sure my mom told you about Rainbow.”

Nancy brightened. “She did, and I’d love to meet Rainbow.”

“The last time I checked, she and the puppies were asleep,” Jenny said. “So let’s start with some of our other animals, like Beatrice and the huskies. They live in the barn with the horses. The cattle have the other barn in back.”

Soon Jenny and Paul were showing Bess, George, and Nancy the husky team in the heated horse barn. Seven thick-furred

gray-and-white dogs wiggled and whined in one squirming pack as they vied for each girl's attention. Jenny said, "Grover is part of the pack, too. He and Icicle there"—she pointed to a husky with black-tipped ears—"are the sled team leaders, but Grover lives in the house with us. Or with Rainbow, that is."

"I'm glad that Rainbow and Grover can be together if they like each other so much," Bess said. "It figures they're with each other, anyway, since they're the parents of the puppies—kind of like they're married."

"In many animal species," Paul said, "the males and females don't care about staying together for very long, but male and female wolves often bond for life, just as if they're married. Their children sometimes stay with them, too, and that's how a wolf pack is formed. The parents are called the alpha male and the alpha female. They're the dominant wolves in the pack—no one messes with them."

"Except sometimes if a lower wolf is especially feisty, he or she will challenge the alpha wolf to a fight," Jenny explained. "Usually, the alpha wolf will put him in his place and he'll cry uncle by rolling over and exposing his belly. But sometimes the challenger refuses to give up, and then they'll fight to the death."

"Sounds rough being an alpha—kind of like being a king or queen and not being able to trust the underlings," Bess said.

"It's a lot like that," Paul said. "I mean, wolf society definitely isn't a democracy. But wolves take care of every animal in the pack. They're incredibly social. Lone wolves miss having a companion so much that they've been known to travel thousands of miles searching for a mate."

"So is howling a way for them to talk to one another?" Nancy asked.

"They howl for a lot of reasons," Paul replied. "No one knows for sure, but scientists think wolves howl to get the pack together or to call one another from afar or to announce the beginning of a hunt. They howl less in May and June because they don't want to draw predators' attention to their newborn



pups. They also howl when they grieve for a dead friend or mate.”

“Why did Rainbow have her puppies now—instead of in May or June?” Bess wanted to know.

“Because she’s mostly domesticated, and her puppies don’t need the summer months to mature,” Paul answered.

“Does a wolf have a sense of smell as good as a dog’s?” George asked.

“It’s awesome. Wolves can pick up smells several miles away if the wind is right,” Paul said. “Wolves also have great hearing but not such great eyesight. Their senses are a lot like dogs’. In fact, wolves are ancestors of domestic dogs.”

Jenny led the girls through the barn, which was filled with the sound of horses crunching grain in buckets for their evening meal. At the end of the bam was a room with several birdcages and plants inside. Moisture covered the glass walls, and the humid air reminded Nancy of a tropical rain forest. After showing the girls Beatrice the hawk and a brilliantly colored parrot named Sapphire, Jenny suggested that Rainbow and her pups might be ready to meet them.

“Its almost dinnertime for Rainbow,” Jenny explained. “I’m sure they’re all awake.”

“Great. Let’s go, then,” Bess said excitedly. “I’ve never met a real live wolf before.”

The girls followed Jenny and Paul out of the barn and across a large fenced-in yard that separated the barns from the house on one side. The sky was suddenly cloudy, Nancy observed. Maybe it would snow after all.

Steam puffed up from behind a picket fence off a patio in back of the house. “That’s the heated pool,” Jenny told them. “You guys are welcome to swim in it anytime. It feels especially great after a day of skiing.”

“And what’s that building?” Nancy asked, pointing to a low wooden structure behind the cow bam, on the edge of a thick pine forest.

“That’s going to be the wolf education center,” Jenny said. “The wolf sanctuary will go in behind the center and extend into the forest.”

Jenny had barely finished speaking when a red pickup truck peeled into sight at the front of the house.

“Whoa!” she cried as the truck tried desperately to stay on the driveway loop.

Everyone watched in horror as the truck wobbled, then bounced off the driveway, skidding through the snow toward the post-and-rail fence surrounding the yard.

Nancy stared as the truck sped up. It’s not stopping! she thought.

“Hold it!” Paul yelled as it crashed through the fence and into the yard, scattering chickens and raising plumes of snow.

Paul and the four girls stood frozen in shock as the truck accelerated. It was zooming right at them!

## 4

### *A Scream in the Night*

Nancy jolted into action. “Get out of the way, everyone!” she cried.

Nancy and Paul bolted toward the nearest barn while the others ran for the lodge. The truck swerved toward Nancy and Paul as if they were magnets.

“This way!” Nancy said, grabbing Paul by his coat sleeve and dragging him to the right. The truck whizzed by, missing them by inches. With the barn looming in front of it, the truck screeched to a stop only a few yards from the nearest stall.

The driver’s door flew open. Nancy stared, curious to see who’d been driving. Some crazy cowboy? she wondered.

A dainty-looking cowboy boot emerged, worn by a diminutive white-haired lady in chaps and a brown felt hat.

Paul scowled as the woman jumped out of the truck. “Grandma!” he cried.

Jenny jogged over to Nancy and Paul, followed by Bess and George. “Your grandmother ought to have her eyes checked,” she told Paul angrily. “She almost killed us.”

Striding confidently toward the group, Paul’s grandmother moved as if she were forty. But as she came closer, Nancy could tell from her wrinkled weatherworn skin that she was definitely pushing eighty.

“Grandma, are you all right?” Paul asked.

“I’m not dead yet,” his grandmother said fiercely. Turning to Jenny, she added, “I’m sorry about your fence, dear. Obviously, I’ll pay for it. Do let your parents know, won’t you?”

Jenny nodded while the woman introduced herself to Nancy, Bess, and George as Stella Stevenson. "I don't know what got into me," Mrs. Stevenson went on. "It must be my arthritis. It's been bothering me lately, and it felt like my knee locked."

"Grandma," Paul said, "you really ought to hire a driver. You can easily afford one, and you're putting yourself and others in danger if your arthritis makes you drive like that."

"Nonsense!" Mrs. Stevenson proclaimed, glaring at her grandson as if he were nuts. "I'll do nothing of the sort. I'm an independent woman, and that means doing my own driving, thank you. I've just got to get better at taking my arthritis medicine, that's all."

"The hood of your truck is bashed in," Jenny observed, walking toward it. "Oh no!" she said. "Is there someone in the passenger seat?"

"Just Bill Ehret," Mrs. Stevenson said, marching toward the passenger side of the truck. "Don't worry—he's alive. It's just taking him a minute to gather his wits."

Mrs. Stevenson opened the door and dragged out a terrified-looking man with coffee-colored skin, gray hair, and a gray beard. He rubbed his knee and grimaced.

"You'll be okay, Bill," Mrs. Stevenson said. "At least we're alive. There's no need to shiver and shake."

"I hurt my knee, Stella," the man said through clenched teeth. "I hope I'll be able to ski again."

"Of course you will," Mrs. Stevenson declared. "At your age it should be a snap. I'm fifteen years your senior, and I still ride horses."

The man looked as if he were about to explode with irritation, when his gaze focused on the others. Forcing a smile, he extended his hand to Nancy and said, "Hello, there. I'm Bill Ehret, of Thunderbird Ranch. Pleased to meet you."

After Nancy had introduced herself, Bess, and George to Mr. Ehret, Jenny explained to the girls that Thunderbird Ranch was on the other side of Mrs. Stevenson's place, Coyote Corners. Turning to Mrs. Stevenson and Mr. Ehret, she asked, "So what

brings you two over to Elk River? Are you coming for dinner tonight?"

"Unfortunately not, Jenny dear," Mr. Ehret said in a patronizing manner, as if Jenny were still a little girl. "Though I would love to eat one of your father's delicious meals one of these evenings. No, Stella and I are here to see Paul, actually."

"Me?" Paul said in surprise. "What for?"

Mr. Ehret chuckled unpleasantly. "No need to get so defensive, my boy—nothing too bad, I assure you. But remember you mentioned at the recent town meeting that you're building a wolf sanctuary here at Elk River? Well, as neighboring ranchers, Stella and I are concerned about wolves escaping and killing our livestock. We'd just like some reassurance that it would never happen."

"The sanctuary will be properly fenced in, Mr. Ehret," Paul said. "You don't need to worry about wolves escaping. We haven't put the fence up yet because the ground is too frozen to dig, but you're welcome to come back after the spring thaw to make sure the fence is secure. In the meantime, I can show you the education center. Its almost finished, except for a few exhibits."

"It would be my pleasure," Mr. Ehret said.

Mrs. Stevenson gazed fondly at her grandson. "Paul, don't get me wrong. I'm very proud of your work, but I need to balance your accomplishments with my livestock. I hope you understand."

"Of course I understand that you and Mr. Ehret don't want your livestock hurt," Paul said. "But I think when you see the wolf sanctuary, you'll understand that the wolves won't pose any danger. The fence will be very secure. Anyway, let me take you to the center. Learning a little more about wolves might ease your fears. Jenny, I'll see you all in a few minutes."

Paul beckoned to his grandmother and Mr. Ehret to follow him across the snowy yard, while Jenny turned to Nancy, George, and Bess. "Never a dull moment at Elk River," she declared, rolling her eyes. "Let's go meet Rainbow."

As Jenny led them toward a door to the wing of the lodge, she explained, "Rainbow has totally bonded with Mom and Dad and me, and even Paul, but she's scared of other people. Mom and Dad use this wing as their own private quarters, and they keep Rainbow and her puppies here with them. We've got so many visitors at Elk River that we have to keep Rainbow off-limits to most people."

"Do wolves make good pets?" George wondered.

"No," Jenny said, "because they don't care about pleasing people the way dogs do. Wolves are skittish with people, but taming Rainbow was necessary because she would have died in the wild without her mother or her pack."

Jenny stepped onto a small side porch and opened the door, which led directly into a large sitting room. A pen made from boards about a foot high rested against the far wall. After stamping the snow off their boots, the girls followed Jenny inside.

As Jenny held her finger to her lips, her mother entered the room from an open hallway door that had a safety gate fitted snugly across it. Alice stepped gracefully over the gate, then knelt by the pen, motioning for the girls to join her.

Nancy marveled at the sight inside the pen: five adorable wolfdog puppies nuzzling their mother. Rainbows piercing yellow eyes looked warily at the girls while Alice held her collar and murmured to her soothingly.

Rainbow was gorgeous, Nancy thought. Her lush fur was mostly gray except for a white patch on her chest, and black paws, tail, and forehead. Of all dog breeds, she resembled a husky, but her legs were longer and thinner. But it was her eyes that really told Nancy she wasn't a dog. Instead of a dog's soft, friendly, curious gaze, Rainbow's was both wild and terrified. Unlike a dog, she obviously had no desire to bond with the girls simply because they were human. Nancy could sense Rainbows protective instincts toward her puppies, and she was careful to keep a respectful distance away.

The puppies were tiny white, gray, and black bundles of fur, and at two and a half weeks, their eyes had only just begun to see. It was impossible for Nancy to tell whether the puppies looked more like dogs or wolves.

“I don’t think you should touch them,” Alice warned. “Rainbow is especially skittish today because we had an intruder last night.”

“What?” Jenny exclaimed, clearly surprised.

“I didn’t want to scare anyone, so I kept it to myself,” Alice said. “But it was really weird.” Pointing to a closed door on the opposite side of the sitting room from the hallway door, she explained to the guests, “John and I sleep with our bedroom door open so we can hear Rainbow or the puppies if they need anything. Last night, Rainbow and Grover started barking like crazy and woke me up. I could swear I saw a shadow lurking in the hallway on the other side of the gate, but whoever it was left immediately—I guess because of all the barking.”

“Could the shadow have been Dody or Dexter?” Jenny asked. “Maybe one of them needed something.”

“I meant to ask them, but I’ve been so busy today,” Alice said. “Really, I forgot about the whole thing till now that I’m noticing Rainbow isn’t her usual self.”

“But if the person was a guest who needed something—like Dody or Dexter—would he have run away when the animals barked?” Nancy asked. “Your description makes me think it was someone who was trying to sneak around, not a guest who needed you.”

“But it could have been a guest sneaking around,” Bess pointed out, “except somehow the word *sneak* doesn’t fit the Warriners’ profile.”

George shrugged. “You never know.”

Nancy thought for a moment. It was possible that either Dexter or Dody had needed something in the middle of the night, like pain medicine after a hard day of skiing. Dexter was shy enough that he might have felt awkward about disturbing the Marshalls and decided to leave when the animals barked.



But remembering the mysterious Swiss army knife with the carved initials, Nancy felt there was a small chance the intruder could be Rusty. Facing Alice, she asked, “Could you tell whether this person was a man or a woman?”

Alice bit her lip for a moment, then said, “As I mentioned, I saw only a shadowy form, but I got the sense it was a man—someone with broader shoulders than those of most women. Sorry, but I don’t remember any other details.”

As Nancy, George, and Bess admired the little wolves, Jenny filled her mother in on Stella Stevenson’s accident.

Alice’s expression was one of disgust. “Stella is so annoyingly stubborn,” Alice said hotly. “I’ve noticed in town how bad her driving is. She bangs other people’s cars when she tries to parallel park, but she refuses to admit that she probably shouldn’t be on the road anymore. All I can say is, she’d better pay for that fence—she can afford it more than we can.”

Opening the outside door, Jenny said, “I’ll tell Ross to fix the fence. If Rainbow goes outside, she could escape.” Nancy noticed a dog door covered by a loose plastic flap carved into the wall next to the door.

“It’s Ross’s day off, darling,” Alice said. “We’ll just have to walk Rainbow on a leash till he gets back.” She pushed down a piece of hard plastic that was hooked above the dog door to cover it.

“I’ll leave him a note, then. Oh, and by the way, it’s beginning to snow,” Jenny finished, closing the door behind her.

“Do you guys worry about Rainbow escaping?” Nancy asked Alice. “I mean, now that she’s tame, would she want to?”

“I definitely don’t think she’d want to,” Alice said. “But her instinct is to roam, and she might get lost. If that happened, she wouldn’t do very well in the wild because she’s used to getting her food from us. Wild wolves are a lot tougher than she is.”

“Even some dog breeds like to wander more than others,” George declared. “Like basset hounds and beagles.”

“Huskies, too,” Alice said. “Still, I have the feeling Grover wouldn’t go as far as Rainbow would. Even though she’s tame,

she's wilder than most dogs."

"What are these puppies going to look like when they're grown?" Bess asked. "They're so cute now."

"They'll still be cute," Alice said, smiling as she gently rubbed a puppy's furry stomach as he rolled over playfully on his back. "In fact, wolfdog breeds are highly prized by some people. They can fetch a lot of money."

"Really?" Nancy asked. "Why do people want them so much?"

"A lot of folks are fascinated by wolves, but they want an animal that's easier to tame," Alice explained. "What a lot of them don't understand is that wolfdog hybrids can be really hard to control. Training them is a full-time job. And they tend to need a lot of attention—hours and hours a day. Otherwise, they can resort to all sorts of bad behaviors, like tearing apart a house."

"Wow!" Bess said. Then, looking at the puppies with an enraptured gaze, she added, "But it's hard to believe these adorable little critters could ever be bad."

Alice smiled, then checked her watch. "Excuse me, girls. I have to help John with supper now. Its almost five o'clock."

• • •

That evening Nancy, Bess, and George joined the Marshalls, the Warriners, and Paul at dinner, which was eaten ranch style at a long table in the cozy dining room off the kitchen. Alice and Jenny served John Marshall's special roast chicken with herb stuffing, new potatoes with rosemary butter, green beans, and salad. A fire blazed in the fireplace while snow blew against the dark windowpanes.

"We're supposed to get several inches tonight," Dody said, his eyes lighting up like those of a happy child. "That's the best news I've heard all day."

Dexter groaned. "Just don't make me go down those extreme expert slopes with you tomorrow, Dad."

"But those are the ones that'll have the best powder," Dody said, looking askance at his son. "Don't be such a chicken, Dex."

Dexter rolled his eyes, then glanced shyly at Bess as he murmured, "I'm just smart enough not to risk them."

"You call those bunny slopes risky?" Dody said, eating a slice of potato. "Now, when I climbed Mount Everest five years ago, *that* was risky."

"Don't forget to mention your travels by dogsled to the Arctic Circle," Alice said.

"Kid stuff," Dody proclaimed, beaming at the memory.

"You can ski with us tomorrow, Dexter," Bess offered. "We won't be doing any extreme expert slopes our first day out."

"Speak for yourself, Bess," George teased.

"You're right, though, Bess," Nancy said. "We'll save those slopes for day two."

• • •

Nancy snuggled under the down comforter on her bed, watching snowflakes swirl outside her window. A hemlock tree close to the house creaked and groaned with every gust of wind, its branches whacking the windowpanes. The noise had woken Nancy up a few minutes earlier, and she lay in bed warm but wide-awake.

The time change is why I'm awake so early, Nancy told herself, glancing at the glow-in-the-dark bedside clock, which read five. It's really six in the morning for me.

Nancy was fluffing up her pillow, trying to get comfortable, when an anguished scream pierced the silent house. She bolted upright.

"George, wake up!" she cried, her heart hammering. "Someone needs help!"

## 5

### *Blizzard Blindness*

George jolted awake, staring wild-eyed at Nancy. “What’s going on? Where are we, Nan?”

“At Elk River Ranch,” Nancy said, jumping out of bed. “Didn’t you hear that scream? It was pretty intense. Let’s find out what’s happening.”

“Okay,” George said groggily. She swung her feet off the bed, grimacing as they touched the freezing cold floor. “But please don’t let this be the beginning of another mystery. I mean, we’re on *vacation*, Drew!”

“It’s not the beginning of a mystery, George,” Nancy said, opening the bedroom door. “It began with Alice’s intruder.”

George sighed as she followed Nancy out the door. “I was afraid of that,” she mumbled.

In the hallway, the two girls paused, listening. The chill air of the house seemed to seep into Nancy’s bones as she waited in her flannel pajamas for another scream. Where could the first scream have come from? she wondered. It had sounded pretty far away—maybe downstairs.

“Look,” George whispered, pointing to an open door at the end of the hall.

“That’s Jenny’s room, or Paul’s,” Nancy said.

The girls tiptoed to the room and peered inside. A four-poster bed stood empty and unmade, and Nancy recognized the blue sweater Jenny had been wearing at dinner slung over an armchair.

“It’s Jenny’s room, but she’s not in it,” Nancy said. She gripped George’s arm. “She could be in trouble. Let’s hurry

downstairs.”

Nancy and George raced down the staircase and into the living room. The sound of a woman’s anguished sobs penetrated the night. “There!” Nancy said, pointing to a hallway off the living room. “It’s coming from the wing of the house where Alice and John live.”

“But that’s private,” George countered. “They might not want us back there.”

“Then again they might,” Nancy said.

As she hurried down the corridor, the sobs *grew* louder. Light shone through the open doorway of the Marshalls’ sitting room, dimly illuminating the narrow hall.

When Nancy and George reached the safety gate separating the hall from the room, they paused, taking stock of the scene inside.

Grover lay on the floor, motionless. Alice and John hovered over him, running their fingers through his fur and inspecting his eyes and muzzle. Jenny sat by Rainbow’s, pen, rocking one of the puppies in her arms as tears streamed down her cheeks.

Nancy felt a pang of foreboding. Where was Rainbow?

Nancy knocked on the wall beside the open door. Jenny and her parents looked up at the sound, their faces stricken with confusion and grief. “Nancy, George,” Jenny said. “I can’t believe this—someone stole Rainbow!”

The puppy in Jenny’s arms whimpered forlornly as it wriggled to get down and join its sisters and brothers. But the other puppies couldn’t give it the comfort it needed. The sight of the tiny puppies sniffing around the pen, whining for their missing mother, was heartbreaking.

“They’re hungry,” Jenny announced, fighting back more tears. “I’d better get a bottle and some baby formula.”

“Let’s call the vet first,” John said, getting to his feet. “We need to find out exactly what to feed them.”

“And tell the vet about Grover, dear,” Alice said just before John disappeared into their bedroom. Holding up a dart, she explained to Nancy and George, “The thief used a tranquilizing

gun on him. I'd like to know how long it takes for this stuff to wear off. Oh dear, I wish I could remember how we mixed the formula when Rainbow was small," Alice said.

At the sound of Rainbow's name, Jenny began to sob pitifully.

"Jenny," Nancy said, stepping over the safety gate to comfort her. "Pull yourself together. I can help you find Rainbow, but you need to calm down and give me some information."

Jenny stared at Nancy with a mixture of hope and disbelief. "How can you help us find Rainbow?" she asked.

"Because I'm a detective," Nancy explained.

"That's right—you *are* a detective, Nancy," Alice said. "Eloise has spoken so admiringly of your work. Would you really be willing to help us?" She frowned, adding, "Oh, but you're on vacation. We can't ask you to spend your free time investigating a case."

"I'd be happy to help you," Nancy said, glancing at the motherless puppies. "Anyway, I wouldn't be able to enjoy my vacation knowing that these puppies don't have their mom."

"Not to mention that Rainbow may be in danger," George added as she stood next to Nancy.

"What's going on here?" a man's voice questioned behind Nancy and George.

"Dody!" Alice exclaimed. "I hope we didn't wake you and Dexter."

Turning, Nancy saw Dody Warriner wrapped in a maroon velvet dressing gown standing outside the gate. Dexter was with him, wearing blue jeans, bare feet, and an untucked red flannel shirt, trying his best to stifle a yawn.

"Don't worry about waking us," Dody said gallantly. "Dex and I want to help if there's a problem. Did I overhear someone say that Rainbow is in danger?"

Alice and Jenny quickly explained to Dody and Dexter that Rainbow was missing. When they'd finished, Dody asked, "Why don't you bring in one of the female sled dogs to act as a surrogate mom? I think she might help calm the little pups."

“Great idea,” Alice proclaimed. “Jenny, could you ask Paul to be a dear and bring Icicle in from the barn? I’d ask Ross, but it’s still officially his day off.”

Jenny frowned. “Paul must still be asleep, but how could he sleep through all this noise?”

Nancy shrugged. “Bess is still asleep, too.”

“I’ll get Icicle,” Jenny said, standing. “The sooner we give these little guys a warm body, the better.”

“No way, Jen—don’t go out,” Alice said firmly. “The barn is two hundred feet away, and it’s snowing like crazy. I know it sounds impossible, but people have died getting lost in blizzards when they’re practically next to their houses. The blowing snow can make it impossible for you to see.”

Jenny shot her mother a critical look. “Then why would you send Paul out in it, Mom? Don’t you care if he freezes in the snow?”

“Of course I care,” Alice said indignantly. She sighed with exasperation. “But Paul has had experience with bad weather conditions when he’s tracked wolves. He’s camped out in blizzards, so he knows just what to do.”

“Mom, I could manage the space between here and the barn,” Jenny said tartly. “But don’t worry, we’ll wait and get Icy first thing tomorrow, and meanwhile, tonight *I’ll* sleep in the pen.”

The bedroom door opened, and John rejoined the group. “Dr. Goodman told me how to bottle-feed them,” he explained. “He also said that Grover should recover soon. We just need to give him plenty of water.”

“Grover’s already awake,” Alice said, stroking Grover’s face as he lay on her lap. Grover stared without moving at the pan of water John had brought him.

As John stepped back over the safety gate to go to the kitchen to mix the formula, Nancy cast her mind back to Alice’s description of the intruder the previous night.

“Did you see anything weird tonight, Alice?” she asked. “Did you sleep with your bedroom door open again?”



"We had our door open, as usual," Alice replied. "But John *and* I are both sound sleepers, and neither of us heard a thing."

"I heard a noise," Jenny cut in, "so I decided to investigate. I couldn't sleep because of the storm, so I was alert to every tiny sound, and my bedroom is right over Mom and Dad's."

"What kind of noise was it?" Nancy asked. "For instance, a footstep, a slamming door, a dog barking?"

"I just heard a few thumps," Jenny said. "Normally, I wouldn't have thought anything of it—maybe a loose shutter from the storm. But I was so creeped out by the intruder last night, that I wanted to make sure the animals were okay." She sighed, then added grimly, "It never occurred to me that the person would be so evil that he'd shoot the animals with a stun gun before they could bark."

"What did you see when you got down here?" George asked.

Jenny pointed to the door leading to the outside yard. "That door was wide open. Snow was blowing in. Rainbow was gone, and Grover was out cold on the floor."

"I wonder if there are still any footprints in the snow," Nancy said, glancing toward the outside door.

"Don't even think about going outside, young lady," Alice said sharply. "We don't want you falling in a snowdrift and freezing ten yards from the house. Remember what I told Jenny."

Nancy hesitated. Alice had a point, and Nancy didn't want to do anything that would make her worry. Still, there might be clues outside that would be buried by the snow if she waited to investigate.

"Alice, please let me check outside," Nancy said. "I won't go more than a few feet from the porch, but I don't want to miss any clues. I just need to borrow a coat and some boots."

Alice frowned, unconvinced.

"Mom," Jenny said, "you're being a worrywart. Let Nancy do her thing. She's only going a few feet away."

"All right," Alice said, sighing. "Just be careful. I don't want to have to tell Eloise that I lost you in a blizzard. You can use my snow boots by the door, and my down parka on the hook above

them. And here, Nancy, take this flashlight.” Opening a drawer in a nearby desk, Alice pulled out a flashlight and gave it to Nancy.

After pulling on Alice’s parka and snow boots, Nancy flicked on the porch light and opened the door. Snow was already a foot deep on the little porch, and the wind threatened to slam the door closed on her. But she managed to slip out the narrow opening and take stock of her surroundings.

The porch light illuminated a circle of snow about six feet in diameter. Nancy pulled the parka tight against the wind as she inspected the pool of lamplit snow. Boot prints led down the porch steps and into the yard, disappearing into the darkness.

Leaning over, Nancy brushed the surface of the snow with her fingers, hunting for more clues. But the only clue she could find was the boot prints, which were disappearing by the second under the soft snow.

Nancy placed Alice’s boot inside one of the prints. Alice’s boot was much smaller, so Nancy guessed that the prints belonged to a man. Because of the porch overhang, the prints on the porch hadn’t been filled with very much snow, and Nancy observed that the boots must have had heavy, rough treads.

Nancy shone the flashlight beyond the pool of lit snow. Driving flakes charged relentlessly through the dark air. Nancy glanced back at the house. The windows of the Marshalls’ wing were ablaze with light, and the porch lantern shone like a beacon. She gritted her teeth. I’ll be fine, she thought. Alice is way too worried. I won’t go far.

Nancy trudged into the snowy yard, pointing her flashlight at the boot prints and searching for any other clues. Maybe the thief dropped something, she thought hopefully.

A sudden blast of wind blew up snow from the ground in a whirlwind of white. Nancy hugged the parka tightly against her throat as she continued to search. But there was nothing visible beyond the footprints, which by now were almost filled up with snow.

Nancy peered over her shoulder at the house. To her amazement she saw no light—only snow cascading like a torrent from the sky. Where's the house? she wondered uneasily. I haven't gone that far, have I?

With a chill caused by more than the weather, Nancy remembered Alice's words about people being lost in snowdrifts next to their homes. I'd better follow my footprints back, she thought, before it's too late.

Nancy shone the flashlight on the indentations that she had just made, but they barely existed. The intruder's prints were completely gone by now.

Whoever stole Rainbow must be out in this storm, Nancy reasoned. How far could a person get even in a four-wheel drive in this weather?

Nancy forced herself to stay calm as she hunted for her tracks in the snow with the flashlight. Is it my imagination, she thought, or is my flashlight growing dimmer?

The flashlight suddenly went out. Nancy shook it hard, determined to make it work. But her efforts were useless—the batteries were totally dead.

The wind blew bitterly against her as she struggled to get her bearings. Where is the house? she wondered, glancing about for a familiar landmark, but the only thing that met her eyes was thick, pelting snow.

Nancy shivered as snow trickled into her boots. She swiveled to each side, peering into the darkness for any hint of light. But each way looked exactly the same—snow against a black backdrop of night.

Nancy stopped. She had become completely disoriented. Which way do I go? she wondered desperately.

## 6

### *Stolen Property*

Taking a deep breath, Nancy willed herself to think. Alice, Jenny, and George know I'm out here, she told herself. So it's only a matter of time before someone comes looking for me, and the house can't be very far.

But I must have walked farther than I thought, she reasoned, or else I'd see lights.

"Help!" she called, trying to make her voice heard above the shrieking wind. "Alice, Jenny, George, it's Nancy. I'm lost!"

She could barely hear her own voice. They'll never hear me, she thought, discouraged.

Snow continued to seep into Nancy's boots. She tried to wiggle her toes, but they were totally numb. Under her pajamas, her legs felt as cold and stiff as marble. With frozen fingers, she tugged at Alice's parka, trying vainly to make it stretch past her hips. I'll get frostbite if I don't find shelter soon, she realized.

"Help!" she called again. "I'm lost."

"Who's that?" came a man's muffled answer. His voice barely carried over the eerie whistling of the wind, but Nancy felt like jumping with relief. "It's Nancy," she cried. "I'm over here."

A moment later a flashlight bobbed into view. Thank goodness, Nancy thought, smiling gratefully at the hooded figure approaching her. A gray-and-white husky with black-tipped ears trotted before him on a leash—Icicle, Nancy remembered.

"Nancy?" the man said. "What are you doing out here?"

Nancy glanced up to see Paul Ferrier's face peering from inside the hood.

“Looking for Rainbow—she’s missing,” Nancy said, bending to hug Icicle.

Paul stared at her. “You’re kidding! I mean, of course you’re *not*, but how . . . terrible.”

“What are you doing out here, Paul?” Nancy asked. Nancy could tell that Paul hadn’t been sent to look for her, because he would have already learned from the Marshalls that Rainbow had disappeared.

“Uh, I couldn’t sleep, so I went to the education center to work on an exhibit,” he answered. “By the time I was ready to come back to the house, it was snowing pretty hard. I decided to get one of the barn dogs to come with me, just in case I got lost. It’s kind of a distance between the barn and the house, and blizzards can be tricky—people have been lost in snowdrifts practically next to their homes.”

“So I’ve learned,” Nancy told him.

“And to make matters worse,” Paul went on, “the lights went out in the barn just as Icicle and I were leaving it. I guess the storm took out the electricity in the lodge, too.”

So that’s why I couldn’t see the porch light anymore, Nancy realized. Between the electricity and my flashlight, I had really bad luck.

Paul gripped Nancy’s arm with one hand and held Icicle’s leash with the other. With her nose to the ground, Icicle guided them through the storm. Nancy crossed her fingers that Icicle would know the way.

Paul eyed Nancy disapprovingly as he said, “You should have known better than to go outside in this weather, Nancy, even if you were helping find Rainbow.” Frowning, he added, “Tell me more about Rainbow. I can’t believe she’s missing. She probably just wandered off somewhere in the house. She’s capable of jumping over that safety gate, you know.”

Keeping her head bent against the wind and snow, Nancy began to tell Paul more details about Rainbow’s disappearance. But she left out her role as a detective investigating the case. Most likely Paul is telling the truth about working in the

education center tonight, she thought. Still, he had no witnesses. What if he had just come back from taking Rainbow somewhere when he found me lost in the snow?

Paul's flashlight shone on a darkened window. Relief fluttered through Nancy—they'd reached the lodge. As Icicle bounded onto the porch, the door flew open.

"Nancy!" Alice said, her hand at her chest as she stood in the doorway. "I was about to call out a search party for you. And, Paul—what are you doing here? We thought you were upstairs asleep. Thank goodness you brought Icicle. She'll bring a bit of comfort to those poor pups."

While Paul was busy telling Alice about his night, Nancy asked to borrow his flashlight for a moment. Shining it on the edge of the porch where some snow had accumulated, Nancy studied one of Paul's boot prints.

Sure enough, the print showed rough, heavy treads, similar to those of the intruder. But since the earlier tracks hadn't been clear, Nancy couldn't tell if they were a match.

Pointing the flashlight at Paul's feet, Nancy saw that his boots were surprisingly large, even though Paul was a slim man of medium height.

One thing's for sure, she thought—his boots don't rule him out.

Nancy handed the flashlight back to Paul, then followed him and Alice inside. Shedding the parka and boots, Nancy watched the grateful puppies settle around Icicle in the pen as Jenny bottle-fed them by candlelight. Icicle seemed resigned to the puppies nipping at her belly as they hunted vainly for milk, though every now and then she would firmly nudge them away.

Nancy's fingers and toes tingled as they grew warmer. After saying good night to the Marshalls and Paul, Nancy returned to her room with George and immediately climbed into her warm, dry bed.

• • •

The next thing Nancy knew, sunlight was pouring in through the bedroom window. She glanced at the bedside clock, which was blinking 12:00. The electricity was working again, she realized.

Not wanting to bother George after a broken night's sleep, Nancy quietly crept out of bed and peered outside. Snow glistened on a pristine landscape like a sugary glaze. Soft, round drifts undulated across the fields, and the trees sparkled with dazzling white coats, looking like strange Arctic beasts. Nancy couldn't wait to go outside, but then she remembered Rainbow.

"Hey, Nan, what time is it?" George asked groggily. "Between traveling yesterday and staying up half the night, I feel as if I've been hit by a truck."

Turning, Nancy saw George sitting up in bed, her short dark hair tousled from sleep. "I don't know. The clock is blinking twelve. We have to reset it. Anyway, I'm surprised at you, George," she added with a grin. "You don't usually say you're tired. But one look at the snow will cure you. The minute you see it, you'll want to be out on the slopes."

George joined Nancy at the window. "Awesome," she pronounced. "Let's get breakfast and hurry outside."

Twenty minutes later Nancy and George were in the dining room, eating steaming hot waffles that John had just cooked. The Warriners and Paul were still asleep, Nancy learned, but all three of the Marshalls, looking totally exhausted, were eating at the table. John told the girls that they'd stayed up the rest of the night taking care of the puppies.

Bess joined the group, wearing black ski pants and a black wool Irish knit sweater. When she learned what had happened to Rainbow, she said, "I can't believe I slept through all that stuff going on. I'm so sorry about Rainbow. I hope we find her soon."

"I hope so, too, Bess," Alice said. "With Nancy here to investigate, we've got a good chance of things working out."

Nancy smiled, but privately she felt worried. Other than the Swiss army knife and some vague boot prints, she hardly had



any clues to go on. She wished she could feel as optimistic as Alice.

“Speaking of investigating,” Nancy said, “I’d like to search the barns. The person might have taken Rainbow to one of them, waiting for the storm to let up. The boot tracks seemed to lead in that direction. Maybe I’ll find some clues there.”

Alice brightened. “I’m honored that you’re getting to work on the case right away, Nancy. Feel free to search anywhere you want.”

After finishing breakfast Nancy, Bess, and George waded through the snow to search the horse barn they’d toured the day before.

“Hello, there, girls,” came a low baritone voice as they were checking out an empty stall. “May I help you?”

Nancy looked up, surprised to see a stranger in his twenties gazing at her over the stall door. The man was tall, broad-shouldered, and ruggedly handsome, with dark hair and eyes full of good humor.

“Oh, hi,” Nancy replied. “We were just . . . uh, exploring. We’re guests here at the lodge.”

“I’m Ross Minkowski,” the man drawled. “I take care of the ranch here at Elk River.” He extended his hand, and Nancy, Bess, and George each shook it. Nancy felt immediately comfortable with his friendly, open manner.

“It’s nice to meet you girls,” he said, smiling. “Sorry I wasn’t around for you yesterday. It was my day off, and I spent it snowboarding. I’d really recommend giving that sport a try if you’ve never done it. It’s a hoot.”

“I’d love to snowboard,” George said excitedly.

“Well, don’t bother to rent the equipment just yet,” Ross said. “The Marshals have some extra stuff that might be your size.”

“Thanks,” George said.

Nancy dug into her parka pocket and pulled out the red Swiss army knife. “Is this yours?” she asked. “I found it yesterday in the upstairs hall. It has your initials on it.”

Ross glanced at the knife and shook his head. “Nope. It’s not mine.” Picking it up, he examined the initials. “Let me think—who else has those initials? Well, the only person who comes to mind is this old hermit guy down the road named Rusty Marconi. And I doubt he would have been visiting the Marshalls.”

The girls thanked Ross and went outside. Nancy didn’t want to blow her cover by looking through the barn for clues while Ross was there.

“He seems like a nice enough guy,” Bess said. “But it’s creepy that the only person he could think of with the initials *RM* is Rusty.”

“I hope Rusty isn’t stalking the Marshalls,” George said. “The thought that he might have Rainbow really freaks me out.”

“Me, too,” Nancy said. “But it makes sense that Rusty stole Rainbow. He’s mad at the Marshalls for trying to get the town to make him clean up his land.”

“I bet that’s exactly what’s going on,” Bess said darkly.

Nancy considered other possibilities for Rainbow’s disappearance. Casting her mind back to the night before, she remembered Paul’s claim that he was working in the education center when the Marshalls discovered that Rainbow was missing. His excuse sounded kind of lame, Nancy thought. Would he really have gone outside in a dangerous snowstorm in the middle of the night just to catch up on some work?

Still, Nancy reasoned that they should rule out Rusty before focusing on Paul. After all, there was no reason for Paul to kidnap Rainbow. Just as she was about to suggest checking out Rusty’s property, the door of the wing burst open.

John rushed outside, checking frantically from side to side. The moment he saw the girls, he shouted, “Nancy, George, Bess! Rainbow’s puppies are missing!”

## *A Telltale Letter*

The girls stared at John speechlessly as he made his way toward them. “The puppies?” Bess squeaked, barely able to get out the words.

“But didn’t Grover and Icicle bark?” Nancy asked when John had reached them.

He shook his head, catching his breath after slogging through the knee-deep snow.

“Maybe they were tranquilized,” Bess suggested.

“Here’s what happened,” John explained. “Alice and Jenny took Grover and Icicle for their morning walk, so our sitting room wasn’t guarded when the thief sneaked in. I’d left the puppies alone while I went to the kitchen to plan dinner. When I returned to the room after about half an hour, the puppies were gone.” John sighed. Despite the cold, bracing air, his face was pale. “I can’t believe someone would come into the house and steal all the puppies. Whoever it was must have been spying on us, because he obviously knew Grover and Icy were away.”

“Hey, you guys,” Alice shouted.

Nancy turned and saw Alice and Jenny walking out of the woods toward a gate to the yard. The huskies strained eagerly on their leashes until Jenny closed the gate behind them and set the dogs free. The two women smiled as Grover and Icicle bounded happily through the snow. Nancy hated the thought that Alice and Jenny were about to learn more bad news.

With one look at John’s grim expression, Alice’s face immediately clouded over. “What’s wrong, darling?” she asked him as she and Jenny approached the group.

“The puppies—they’ve been taken,” John said. As Alice and Jenny looked at him in shock, John quickly told them all about the puppies’ disappearance.

“This is too terrible,” Jenny moaned, fighting tears. “How can we know that whoever has the puppies is taking care of them? They’re still so little. They need their mother’s milk or the right kind of formula to survive.”

“We have to hope that whoever has them knows how to care for very young puppies,” John said gravely.

“I’m sure that this person also has Rainbow,” Alice said. “So at least the puppies are getting good care from their mom.”

Nancy hoped that Alice was right. It made sense that the puppy kidnapper was the same person who had stolen Rainbow, but that didn’t mean that the person was treating the animals right or was even allowing them to be together.

Jenny shivered as the wind began to gust. “Let’s go inside and talk about this. I’m freezing.”

In just a few minutes the group had reassembled in Alice and John’s suite. The sight of Rainbow’s empty pen made Nancy feel sad as she quickly combed the room for clues. Finding nothing, she joined the others on a set of sofas surrounding a coffee table that was piled high with nature magazines.

Alice said, “So, Nancy, what do your detective instincts tell you? Do you have any suspects?”

“Only Rusty Marconi,” she answered. “I found out that the Swiss army knife with the *RM* initials isn’t Ross’s, and since Rusty obviously has a big grudge against you, he seems pretty likely.”

“I totally agree,” Alice said firmly.

“Me, too,” John said.

“I don’t know,” Jenny cut in. Her hazel eyes behind her glasses looked skeptical. “Rusty is such a crank that it’s easy to jump to conclusions about him. But I’m wondering about the ranchers. A lot of them hate wolves, and they might want to steal one just to spite people like us who love them.”

“What do you mean a lot of ranchers hate wolves?” George asked. “Is that true?”

Bess’s puzzled expression mirrored George’s as she said to the Marshalls, “Yeah, you guys are ranchers, and you love wolves.”

“We’re not typical,” Jenny said. “Don’t you remember, Bess, when Mr. Ehret and Mrs. Stevenson came over yesterday, all worked up about the wolf sanctuary? Many ranchers feel the way they do. They’re worried about wolves killing their livestock.”

“But Rainbow is tame,” Bess countered. “She wouldn’t hurt anyone’s animals.”

Jenny gathered her thoughts. “See, on one side there are the wildlife activists who pushed to reintroduce wolves to Yellowstone Park nearby, and on the other side there are the ranchers,” she explained. “The relationship between the two is really bad. Mr. Ehret has had livestock killed by reintroduced wolves that have roamed outside the boundaries of Yellowstone, so he’s really against that program.”

“What program?” Nancy asked. “Is there a special program that relocates the wolves?”

“Yeah,” Jenny replied. “It’s a program that brings Canadian wolves to the American states where their ancestors lived before they were killed or driven away. A bunch of wildlife activists got the government to support bringing a few trial wolves back to this country. They say that wolves really aren’t that dangerous to livestock as long as they’re given enough room to roam and prey on other wild animals.”

Jenny took a breath and went on. “The wildlife people also think it’s important for wolves to live in this country again because it’s part of their original territory and they’re endangered. They want to try everything possible to increase the wolf population so they won’t be endangered anymore.”

Alice said, “An organization called the Defenders of Wildlife offered to pay ranchers for any livestock killed by wolves. That pacified some of the ranchers, but others are still upset. They want their animals to graze in peace.”

“But I still don’t understand,” Bess said. “Why would Mr. Ehret pick on Rainbow and her puppies? They wouldn’t threaten his livestock.”

Jenny shrugged. “It’s just that he’s such a grouch. I wouldn’t put it past him to take Rainbow and her puppies out of spite. Paul and I went to a town meeting recently to get approval for the wolf sanctuary, and Mr. Ehret had a fit about the whole idea. He threatened to shoot any wolf that came across his path.”

Alice leaned her chin on her palm and said, “Bill knows that Paul is very much in favor of reintroducing wolves, right, Jen? It’s a small world around here, and I’m sure Bill learned from Stella Stevenson that her grandson went on expeditions to Canada to retrieve wolves and bring them to the American wilderness.”

“Maybe Mr. Ehret took Rainbow and her puppies to get revenge against Paul for wanting to bring wild wolves back to Wyoming,” Jenny guessed.

“But Rainbow belongs to you guys,” Bess pointed out. “How would stealing her be revenge against Paul?”

“Because Paul loves Rainbow,” Jenny explained, “and he loves me, and he’d see how upset Mom and Dad and I would be.”

“That’s sick!” Bess exclaimed, looking disgusted.

That’s for sure, Nancy thought. But she still wasn’t convinced that Paul himself wasn’t guilty. First, he claimed he’d been out of the lodge when Rainbow was stolen, but no one knew that for sure, and also the treads on his boots may have matched the tracks in the snow that the thief had left. But why would someone who supposedly loves wolves want to steal a mother and her puppies? she wondered.

“By the way, where is Paul?” Nancy asked, trying not to sound too suspicious.

“He’s at a meeting with the town council in Montrose. He’s making sure the wolf sanctuary complies with zoning laws,” Jenny told her.

A thought flashed through Nancy’s mind: If Paul was out, this would be the perfect time to search his room.

Nancy stood up, explaining that since the electricity was working again she'd like to take a warm bath to get the chill out after her ordeal the night before. Leaving Bess and George downstairs talking to the Marshalls, she returned to the upstairs hall.

Nancy peered cautiously around the open door of Paul's bedroom to make sure he wasn't there. Finding the room empty, she went inside.

She gave a cursory glance around the messy room, then zeroed in on his bureau and desk—the two most likely places to find really useful clues like letters or a diary, Nancy reasoned. Nothing but a tangle of clean laundry rested on his bureau, but his desk immediately rewarded Nancy with an open notepad that had words scrawled on it.

It's a letter, Nancy realized excitedly. As she began to read it, she saw that it was an unfinished letter to his faculty adviser.

"I want you to be the first to know, Dr. Wei, that I'm having second thoughts about building the wolf sanctuary," Paul had written, "because I think it's cruel to confine wild animals. Even though I'm engaged to a woman whose family keeps a wolf as a pet, I'm generally opposed to taming and enclosing wild animals, except when zoos provide habitats for endangered species that have lost their own. Even though the wolf sanctuary would be fifty acres, it would still be like a very large prison for these animals."

The letter ended there.

Nancy bit her lip, turning Paul's words over in her mind. If he feels it's so cruel to confine a wild animal, could he have set Rainbow and her puppies free? Nancy wondered. She glanced back at the desk. A number of books and journals relating to animals and wolves were piled on it in no particular order, but Nancy didn't see any other obvious clues. She opened the top drawer of the desk, hoping for some information on Rainbow's whereabouts.

A gray object shone dully from behind a stack of notepads. Nancy pulled out the drawer farther. She froze. A tranquilizing



gun had been stashed in the back of the drawer, along with a dart—exactly like the one that had stunned Grover!

## *The Hermit of Montrose*

Nancy heard footsteps hurrying down the hallway toward Paul's room. Quickly she shut the drawer, her heart hammering. Could Paul have come back from his meeting already? She'd better find some place to hide, just in case.

Nancy scanned the room. There was a closet on the opposite side, but the footsteps had almost reached the room. She had no time.

In a flash, Nancy scrambled under the huge antique four-poster bed with its unmade bedcovers draping over the sides. Thank goodness Paul's a slob, Nancy thought. The blankets and sheets should keep me out of sight.

The footsteps pounded into the bedroom and stopped by the bureau. Peeking out from under a heavy blanket, Nancy could see someone's legs from the knees down. Those are definitely Paul's blue jeans and boots, she decided.

Bureau drawers opened and shut in quick succession, and Paul's face briefly appeared in Nancy's view as he kneeled to open the bottom one. "Where on earth are those radio collars?" he muttered peevishly before slamming the drawer shut. Nancy barely had time to wonder what he meant when he dashed out of the room.

Nancy took a breath. She waited until his footsteps thudded down the stairs to the first floor before daring to squirm from her hiding place.

Nancy tiptoed out of Paul's room and quietly returned to the first floor. Bess was sitting in the living room, sipping late morning coffee and chatting with Dexter around the fire.

“My dad went off skiing at the crack of dawn,” Dexter was telling Bess. “He never gets tired, even when he doesn’t get much sleep, like last night. I’m glad I slept late, though,” he added, a blush stealing across his boyish features, “because it’s nice hanging around here with you.”

Bess shot Dexter a sideways grin. “Ditto,” she murmured. “But I hope I didn’t spoil your morning by giving you the bad news about the puppies.”

“You? Spoil my morning?” Dexter exclaimed, staring at Bess incredulously. “No way!”

Nancy cleared her throat, and Dexter and Bess spun around.

“Sony to interrupt you guys,” Nancy said. “But did you see Paul come downstairs?”

“Yeah, he went out the front door in a major rush,” Dexter said, blushing again when he realized that he and Bess had been overheard.

“Are the Marshalls still in their suite?” Nancy asked.

“All three are in the kitchen making lunch,” Bess said, “and George went upstairs to put on ski clothes.”

“Okay, thanks, guys.” Nancy headed toward the kitchen and pushed open the swinging door. “Hi,” she said to the Marshalls, who were hurrying around the kitchen putting lunch together. “I hope you don’t mind if I barge in here, but I have a question.”

“Feel free to barge in wherever you want, Nancy,” Alice said, laying out freshly sliced turkey and French bread on a platter. “After all, you’re helping us find Rainbow and the pups, and you’ll need to ask us questions sometimes. No matter how busy John and I get, this case comes first. So what’s your question?”

“I just wondered what a radio collar is,” Nancy said.

John frowned. “A radio collar? Why do you want to know that?”

“Uh, I was flipping through a magazine on wolves, and it mentioned one,” Nancy fudged, wanting to keep her encounter with Paul secret for now.

“Oh,” John said. “Well, when wolves are reintroduced to a territory, scientists keep tabs on them by using radio collars.

Those are collars with a tracking device in them. If you put one on a tranquilized wolf and set the animal free, scientists can track where the wolf is as it roams in the wild. The scientists can tell if the wolf is still alive and whether it's staying within its territory."

Hmm, Nancy thought, could Paul want to put a radio collar on Rainbow and the puppies so he can track them in the wild? If so, then he must still be holding them somewhere.

Nancy suddenly felt hopeful. As long as the wolves were still alive and in captivity, there was a chance she'd be able to find them.

Alice poured oil and vinegar over a large green salad, then glanced at Nancy. "I encouraged George and Bess to go skiing this afternoon, and I think you should go with them, Nancy. The sun is out, and there's lots of fresh powder on the slopes. The conditions at Elk Mountain will be perfect. And please don't worry about the case. Taking a break from it might refresh your mind and help you think about it more clearly."

"You came to Wyoming to do winter sports, so go for it, Nancy," Jenny chimed in.

Nancy smiled appreciatively. Jenny and Alice are right, she thought. I could definitely use a break.

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After lunch John helped Nancy, George, and Bess pack their ski equipment in one of his Jeeps. "This is an extra vehicle that I lend to guests," he explained. "For your information, the roads have been plowed since eight this morning. Snowstorms are no big deal in these parts—we mountain folk are always ready for them."

The girls thanked John, then hopped into the Jeep with Nancy driving. Alice had already given them directions to Elk Mountain, which was just on the other side of Montrose.

Heading back toward town on the same road they'd driven on yesterday, Nancy drew in a deep, relaxing breath. It's awesome

to be in these mountains after a big snow, she thought—I can't wait to get out on the slopes.

Nancy slowed the Jeep as she came to a curve. Halfway around it, piles of snow-covered junk suddenly replaced the beautiful landscape. "Rusty's place!" she exclaimed. "I'd forgotten what a shock the sight of it is."

"You're not kidding, Nan," George said, shaking her head as she sat beside Nancy in the front seat. "Total gross-out is more like it."

"That guy must spend every moment of his life collecting junk," Bess declared in an awed tone.

As soon as Rusty's place was out of sight behind the curve, Nancy pulled onto the shoulder of the road and stopped the Jeep. "What are you doing, Nancy?" Bess and George asked in unison.

She arched a brow at her friends. "Who feels like helping me search Rusty's property for Rainbow?" she asked, unsnapping her seat belt.

"You've got to be kidding, Nancy!" Bess exclaimed, horrified. "Rusty's the craziest person I've ever seen. He'll shoot us for sure if he catches us snooping. Plus, my turquoise parka will stand out against the snow—and so will your dark one, Nan. We'll be like sitting ducks for that guy."

"He does seem kind of territorial," George commented.

"But I don't think he's home, guys," Nancy said. "He must own at least one car that's drivable, and it's definitely not there. Or, at least, he hasn't dug it out yet."

Bess and George exchanged looks. "Okay, Nancy," Bess said, gritting her teeth as she opened her door. "You win."

A minute later the three girls were peering into Rusty's ramshackle house. Many of the windows were broken, with plastic wrap taped over the panes to keep out the wind and cold. Inside was a small room serving as a kitchen and sitting room. The wood-burning stove in the middle looked totally cold.

"What's that?" Bess said, grabbing Nancy's arm. "I saw something move. Maybe it's rats!"

“No, Bess, cats,” Nancy said as her eyes adjusted to the dim light inside. A pack of scrawny cats roamed around the room, eating from open tins amid a jumble of yellow newspapers, dirty rags, and cast-off tools.

“Poor things,” Nancy said. “At least Rusty’s feeding them, though.” Through an open doorway, Nancy could see an extremely messy bedroom but no sign of Rainbow anywhere. “Rusty’s definitely not home. Let’s look around his property.”

The three girls headed downhill toward a narrow stream where dilapidated livestock sheds dotted the snowy yard. The hill was a minefield of old junk. Tree trunks had grown up around ancient tires, machinery parts were strewn everywhere, and broken farm equipment from the 1950s rose up like some nightmarish dinosaur species on the verge of a second life.

“Whoa!” Bess said as her boot kicked up a whitish object from under a mound of snow. “What was *that*?”

The white thing landed with a thud in front of George. “Weird!” George exclaimed. “I think it’s some kind of skull.” She bent down to examine it as Nancy and Bess joined her.

“You’re right, George,” Nancy said, studying the smooth, ivory-colored skull with its long snout and powerful teeth. Glancing farther down the hill, she saw a number of pigs rooting around inside a small pen filled with muddy snow. “It’s probably a pig’s,” she added.

“Gross,” Bess said with a shiver. “Let’s get out of here.” She grabbed Nancy and George by the arm and pulled them back a step.

“Not before I check out those sheds,” Nancy said firmly. Brushing off Bess’s grip, she led the way toward the cluster of sheds.

A soft whimpering noise came from the nearest one as the girls approached it. Nancy, Bess, and George exchanged looks. “That doesn’t sound very piglike to me,” George commented.

“Maybe it’s Rainbow,” Nancy said, peering into the open doorway of the dark, rotting structure, “or one of her pup—” A

horrible stench of sour milk and dirty animals wafted through the doorway, stopping Nancy in midsentence.

“Boy, does this place stink!” Bess said beside her. “Those poor animals. Doesn’t he ever clean up?”

“I don’t think cleaning is one of Rusty’s specialties,” George said dryly.

Heavy footsteps sounded behind the girls, but before Nancy could whirl around to see who was there, a rough hand seized her by the collar and pushed her into the shed with Bess and George.

Then the door slammed behind them.

“Serves you right for snoopin’ on private property,” a man said, cackling triumphantly as he held the door closed from the outside.

After being outside in the bright afternoon, Nancy blinked, trying to make out what was in the dim shed. A gigantic form stood ominously in the center, silhouetted by a patch of dim sunlight that filtered through cracks in the wall.

Nancy’s heart sank. It was an enormous hog, and its tiny eyes glinted murderously. With a horrible, piercing squeal, it charged right at them.

## *Trapped in High Placen*

Bess screamed, her boots slipping in the muck as she ran toward a broken-down stall on the left. In the nick of time, she scrambled through the stall door and shut it behind her.

Nancy and George darted to the right. Just as the hog was about to butt them, the shed door opened.

The hog swerved aside as a loud rattling noise clanged outside. With its ears pricked forward, the hog galloped through the opening, grunting happily.

“Come and get it, Silo,” Rusty coaxed. “A bucket full o’ slops.”

Nancy cautiously moved to the doorway and watched as Rusty banged a metal bucket with a stick while the hog eyed him eagerly.

“Bess, George,” Nancy whispered, motioning them forward. “Come on, let’s get out of here before Rusty has a chance to shut the door again.”

The girls rushed outside, trying their best to appear invisible as they sidestepped Rusty.

“Hey! Not so fast,” Rusty said, dropping the bucket of slops in front of the hog, which instantly started to gulp it down.

Rusty whipped out his slingshot from his pocket. A small but sharp-looking stone rested in the elastic pouch as he pointed the weapon right at them. “You girls ain’t going nowhere till you answer some questions. By the way, how’d you like my little trick, girls? Silo here scared you silly, didn’t he?”

Nancy, Bess, and George studied Rusty warily. His puffy cheeks gave his eyes a squinty look exactly like Silo’s, and his



raggedy gray beard hung halfway down his chest.

“Uh, he did scare us,” George said. “Can we go now?”

Rusty narrowed his eyes even more. A cold, angry look passed over his face as he spat out, “Go on—get lost. And if I see you girls here again, you’ll be in for a real tussle. No more fun and games like today. This here Silo is bacon bits next to his sister, Big Bertha. Now, there’s a silk purse sow for you.”

As he spoke, Nancy glanced down at his boots. Sure enough, they were big, and the tracks they’d made in the snow around him showed heavy treads. They could be a match for the ones in the snow last night, Nancy thought. I just wish those had been clearer.

Rusty lowered the slingshot as he locked Silo back into the shed. Meanwhile, Nancy rummaged inside her pocket and pulled out the Swiss army knife, which had been there since she’d shown it to Ross earlier. “Don’t worry, we’ll go,” she assured him. “Just let me ask you something, first. Is this yours?” She held the knife toward him in the palm of her hand.

As fast as a striking snake, Rusty snatched the knife from Nancy’s hand and dropped it into his pocket. “Never seen it before in my life,” he declared, “but I could always use one o’ these.”

“Hey, give that back,” Nancy demanded.

Rusty lifted the slingshot again. “Didn’t I say, get lost?” he snapped, aiming the stone right at her. “I don’t take kindly to nosy strangers.”

Nancy sighed, her spirits dampened. The trip to Rusty’s was a bust, she decided. Not only had they not found any evidence of Rainbow, but she’d just lost her one possible clue to the thief’s identity. “Let’s go, guys,” she murmured, turning back toward the road.

As the girls trudged back to the Jeep, George said, “Well, that sure was an adventure.”

“Not a fun one, though,” Bess said. She took a handkerchief from her parka pocket and began to wipe mud off her black ski pants as they walked along.

“But what do you guys think? Is Rusty just a crazy old harmless hermit, or do you think he could be guilty?” Nancy asked.

“Well, he’s definitely not harmless, even if he isn’t guilty,” George said. “That pig almost killed us.”

“I think he may be guilty,” Bess said. “I mean, Rainbow could be in another shed. Plus, he took your knife, Nan. Maybe it really was his and he doesn’t want there to be any evidence linking him to Elk River.”

Nancy’s head was swimming. Bess and George were right, she thought. Their trip to Rusty’s hadn’t ruled out Rusty as a suspect.

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The girls stood at Elk Mountain, studying a giant map of the trails that had been posted near the base lodge. At two o’clock the sun made the slopes glisten. Fresh snow coated the trees, turning the scene into a magic wonderland, and the big blue Wyoming sky seemed to stretch above them forever.

Nancy felt a rush of excitement. “Look, guys,” she said, pointing at the map, “there are trails here at all different levels. This place would keep us busy for days if we didn’t have a mystery to solve.”

“Wow, look at all those black diamonds,” George said excitedly, referring to the expert slopes.

“I’m not risking my life twice in one day,” Bess announced. “Won’t one of you guys go down an intermediate slope with me? There are plenty of those, too, and I’ll bet they’re pretty challenging.”

“I’ll come with you, Bess,” a man’s voice said behind them.

Turning, the girls saw Dexter Warriner in a black ski outfit and goggles, smiling at them eagerly. “Dexter, hi!” Bess said. “I didn’t know you were here.”

“I decided to join Dad after all. Alice dropped me off on her way to go shopping in town,” he explained. “It’s such an awesome day, and I didn’t want to waste all that fresh powder.”

“So where is your dad?” George asked him.

Dexter shrugged. “I haven’t seen him yet. He’s probably schussing down some double black diamond trail. There’s no way I can keep up with that man.”

Nancy laughed. Turning to Bess, she said, “We’ll all come with you, Bess. George, it won’t kill you to do the easier slopes today, especially since you’re not as expert at snowboarding as you are at skiing.”

“You’re right, guys,” George said. “I could use a day to warm up.”

Dexter suggested taking Sundance, a long, intermediate trail that he claimed was usually uncrowded so the powder would probably still be fresh. The trail started at the top of the gondola, which, because it was a weekday, had no line.

The group boarded the gondola and rode it to the top, marveling at the view of endless mountains and sky. Once they got off, Nancy, Bess, and Dexter put on their skis, and George snapped her boots into the snowboard that John had lent her. Then the three girls followed Dexter down a narrow woodland trail that quickly opened onto a wide panoramic slope.

At first the cold wind stung Nancy’s face, but as soon as she reached the open slope, she warmed up immediately, thanks to the exercise and sun. Halfway down the mountain the group paused at the side of the trail to catch their breath.

George said, “It’s awesome weather, kind of like the beach.”

“Not quite,” Bess said. But she unzipped her powder blue parka a few inches and added, “Almost.”

They took off again, following Dexter. As Nancy skied along, she felt totally free, gliding effortlessly through the soft, powdery snow. It’s almost like I’m flying, she thought happily.

After almost two hours of perfect skiing, Dexter spotted his father taking off his skis at the base lodge. “Hey, Dad!” he cried, doing a neat parallel stop by his father. “Are you finished for the day?”

Dody Warriner’s face glowed from exercise and the frosty air as he smiled fondly at his son. “Sure am. My back is still a little

sore from burro riding in the Andes Mountains during my recent fishing trip there. But don't let me stop you kids from taking another run. You've got time—it's not quite four."

"Okay," Dexter said, "if you girls are interested."

"Sure," Nancy said, while Bess and George nodded eagerly.

A few minutes later Nancy, Bess, George, and Dexter were sitting in a four-person chairlift on their way to an intermediate trail called Ace of Hearts. "I felt safer in the gondola," Bess commented, peering down at a rocky crevice far below. "At least we were inside."

"We seem to be the only skiers riding this chairlift," George said. "I guess everyone else has called it a day. At least we'll have the trail to ourselves."

A cold wind blew up, rocking the chairlift as it zipped along. Soon they were out of sight of the lodge, surrounded by thick trees and steep slopes. An icy stream glistened in a gully far below as the sun slipped behind the mountain. Jagged rocks protruded from the banks.

"It's getting kind of dark," Bess said nervously.

"That's why most ski resorts close at four," Dexter told her. "In the mountains, the late-afternoon light gets kind of tricky for skiing."

The chairlift jerked to a halt. Bess gasped, while Nancy, George, and Dexter clutched the safety bar as the chair swung back and forth. They all peered down at the rocky streambed thirty feet below.

"How long are we going to have to wait here?" Bess asked.

## *The Elk's Mysterious Message*

As the chair rocked precariously, Nancy felt her fingers start to become numb inside her ski mittens. Gripping her poles between her knees, she loosened her mittens and wrapped her thumbs inside her fists, hoping to warm herself.

Five minutes passed, and the sunlight grew steadily dimmer. "Do you think they've forgotten about us?" Bess wondered.

George checked her watch. "It's after four. I wonder if they thought the last person had already gotten off the lift, and so they stopped it for the night."

"Don't say that," Bess moaned. "We'll have major frostbite by morning."

Nancy bit her lip. She doubted anyone could survive a winter night in these mountains without shelter. But she kept her thoughts to herself, not wanting to scare Bess more than she already was. Anyway, the Marshalls would realize they were missing and send out a search party for them.

"Dad will see we're missing and get someone to look for us," Dexter said, echoing Nancy's thoughts. "Still, I wonder how many hours it'll take until they figure it out." He sighed, taking off his goggles, and added, "I sure wish I'd brought the yellow lens for these. The dark lens is totally useless in the dusk."

Despite the wide open spaces around her, Nancy felt like a prisoner in a concrete cell. I hate being trapped, she thought, especially when I can't do anything to help the situation.

Or could she? Nancy's mind began to click away. They were too far from either the bottom or the top of the mountain for their shouts to be heard, and they definitely couldn't jump onto

the sharp rocks below. But what if they could somehow get a message to someone?

With her poles still between her knees, Nancy took off a mitten and reached into her pocket for a pen and notepad. “Help—we’re stuck on the four-person lift!” she scrawled as the others looked on curiously. Then, folding the paper, she stuck it onto the bottom of one of her poles.

“Cool idea, Nancy,” Dexter said.

In the fading light Nancy narrowed her eyes and pointed the pole toward a trail that was barely visible beyond the trees bordering the crevice.

Nancy concentrated hard, determined to aim the pole through a sliver of space between the trees. Throwing her shoulder back as far as she could, she held her breath and launched the pole, praying that it would reach the trail.

The pole sailed through the air like a javelin, barely brushing the trees. Seconds later it landed directly in the middle of the trail.

“Great throw, Nan,” George said.

“Now we just have to hope that someone comes along and finds it before we freeze,” Bess said.

“If someone skis by us on that trail, we’ll still need to shout for help,” Nancy said. “But they’ll have a better chance of hearing our voices if they stop to pick up this message.”

“Good thinking,” Dexter said, “because most people would ski by too fast to hear us.”

“Especially with all this wind,” George added.

“But what if the last person has already skied down the mountain?” Bess asked.

Bess echoed Nancy’s worst fears, but Nancy saw no point in worrying the others. “I’m sure that the ski patrol goes down each slope at the end of the day, just to make sure that no one broke a leg or something.”

Five minutes later they heard voices on the trail. “Hey, we’re stuck!” Dexter bellowed. “Help!”

A ski patroller in a maroon parka appeared in the space between the trees, waving a two-way radio at them. Nancy could barely make out his partner behind him.

Ten seconds later the lift started up with a jolt, and the ski patrollers gave the kids the thumbs-up sign before picking up Nancy's pole and moving on.

"Thank heavens!" Bess exclaimed, with a deep breath of relief.

The lift sailed up the mountain again without a problem. Once they'd reached the top, Nancy skied over to the lift operator's hut and asked, "What happened? Did the lift break or did you guys forget we were on it?"

"The guy at the bottom must have really goofed, miss," the operator said, a huge wad of bubble gum snapping in his jaws. "See, he calls me with the number of the last occupied chair after we close the lift at four o'clock. Then I call him back when that chair arrives at the top, and we stop the lift. Well, the number of the chair he gave me was the one that carried the passengers before you. Problem was, there was a good thirty-chair gap between you guys. I was just getting ready to close up shop and ski down for the night when ski patrol came by to say that passengers were still onboard. Oh, and if all that stuff wasn't weird enough, my phone line went dead, too."

The operator advised the kids to warm up with a cup of hot chocolate in the mountaintop lodge, which would be closing at four-thirty. As he was gesturing toward a round stone structure behind a stand of trees, a familiar dark-skinned man with a gray beard sneered at Nancy from the top of a nearby trail. The moment they locked gazes, the man skied away.

"Who's that?" Nancy asked, trying to jog her memory.

"Bill Ehret," Dexter replied. "He owns Thunder-bird Ranch. I know him because he's a friend of Dad's. Actually, the reason Dad and I came to stay at Elk River Ranch is that Mr. Ehret recommended it. He thinks this whole area is great for outdoors stuff because it's so uncrowded, and that's exactly what Dad likes."

“Excuse me, guys,” Nancy said quickly, pushing herself toward the top of the trail with her remaining pole. Over her shoulder, she added, “I don’t need any hot chocolate. Meet you at the base lodge.”

Dexter frowned, throwing her a puzzled look as she took off. Nancy hoped she wasn’t being rude, but she was eager to know why Mr. Ehret had been lurking around the area after their scare on the lift. Could *he* have given the lift operator the wrong information and then cut the phone line? she wondered.

Nancy paused for a moment at the top of a double black diamond slope called Twister. Mr. Ehret’s bright green parka was already halfway down it. If she didn’t keep him in sight, she might lose him on one of the many woodland trails opening off the expert slope.

I can’t let myself get freaked by this hill, Nancy thought, even though I have only one pole. Taking a deep breath, she plunged down, doing quick parallel turns through the gigantic moguls at a frighteningly steep angle. Meanwhile, Mr. Ehret was zooming over the moguls way ahead, sending up showers of snow in his wake.

I guess Mrs. Stevenson’s bad driving didn’t affect this guy’s skiing after all, she mused as he executed a perfect right turn onto an adjoining trail.

Nancy struggled to catch up. She leaned back on her skis with knees bent and pole tucked under her arm for maximum speed. In the setting sun, the moguls cast huge shadows that obscured parts of the snow like murky pools, making the skiing especially treacherous. By the time Nancy reached the narrow trail where Mr. Ehret had turned, he was already far ahead, a bright speck amid dim tree shadows.

I’ll never get him this way, Nancy thought, catching sight of him turning left onto yet another trail. She studied the trees to her left. I’ll bet if I go through the woods, I’ll end up on the trail Mr. Ehret is on now, she reasoned. I just wish I had more light.

Nancy took a deep breath, then forged ahead into the woods. As she picked up speed, huge trees seemed to come at her like



enemy soldiers. Sometimes an overhanging branch would slap her in the face, its needles pricking her skin. It was like a nightmare obstacle course, and she had to use all her athletic skill to avoid slamming into tree trunks.

Nancy's legs were shaking by the time she reached the trail below, and to make matters worse, Mr. Ehret was a good fifty feet ahead. By the time the trail opened onto a broad intermediate slope leading to the base lodge, a group of lingering skiers had appeared from a higher part of the slope, blocking Nancy's way.

Frustrated, Nancy excused herself, angling to get around them. Once free, Nancy scanned the wide slope, but Mr. Ehret had disappeared.

Nancy raced down the hill. There's a chance I'll catch him at the lodge, she hoped.

Several people were taking off their skis and leaning them against wooden ski rests when she arrived. Nancy studied the group but recognized no one. A patch of bright green flashed into her view amid a throng of departing skiers way over by the parking lot.

Could that be Mr. Ehret getting into a maroon Jeep? she wondered. The person was too far away for her to tell.

Nancy clenched her fists, feeling incredibly frustrated. She knew that by the time she took off her skis and hurried over there, she'd be too late to catch him.

Nancy skied over to the base of the chairlift, where the lift operator was talking to a telephone technician.

"I'm so sorry, miss," the operator said, when he learned that Nancy was one of the group who'd been stranded on the lift. "I tried to call my partner at the top of the lift, but for some reason, our phone line was dead. We're getting ready to fix it now."

After learning that the operator hadn't noticed anyone hanging around his area earlier, Nancy thanked him for the information. Then, after retrieving her ski pole from the ski rack

where the patroller had hung it, she joined Bess, George, and Dexter, who were taking off their skis by the base lodge.

After Bess explained that the mountaintop lodge had closed when they got there, Dexter threw Nancy a questioning look and said, “Boy, were you in a hurry, Nancy—and you went down Twister, too, with one pole! Was it something I said?”

Nancy laughed. “Sorry to run off like that, Dexter. I, uh . . . thought I saw someone I knew.”

• • •

That evening, after privately telling the Marshalls about their day, Nancy, George, and Bess sat down to a hearty buffet-style spaghetti-and-meatballs dinner at Elk River Ranch. Once they, Paul, Dody, Dexter, and the Marshalls were all seated, Nancy asked Dody how he knew Bill Ehret.

“Oh, Bill and I go way back,” Dody said, helping himself to some salad. “We were foreign correspondents in the Soviet Union during the cold war, and also in Vietnam. He’s exactly like me—enjoys living life on the edge. Some people think he’s a crotchety old geezer, but they just don’t know him.”

“Well, he *can* be crotchety,” Alice put in.

“He’s just a real straight shooter,” Dody explained. “He’s not afraid to tell it like it is. I admire his gutsiness. He’d fight to the finish for his beliefs.”

“With all due respect, Dody,” Paul said, scowling, “I think you’re dead wrong. Bill Ehret is an awful man. He’s obsessed with keeping wild wolves out of Wyoming. If he saw one he’d shoot it without thinking twice, even though he knows it’s illegal.”

Dody speared a lettuce leaf with gusto, then said, “I understand where you’re coming from, Paul, but Bill’s just superindependent. He’s not going to let himself be pushed around by anybody. That’s both his strength and his weakness.”

After they’d all finished, John suggested adjourning to the living room for coffee and dessert. Taking her cappuccino cup to a chair by the fire, Nancy challenged George to a game of chess.

“You’re on, Nan,” George said excitedly, setting down a plate of cookies on a nearby table while she helped Nancy set up the board. “Hey, what’s that?”

Nancy looked up to see George pointing at the elk’s head above the fireplace. A piece of folded white paper was impaled on its right antler.

“It looks like it might be a note,” Nancy said.

Everyone gathered around Nancy as she moved a side chair directly under the elk’s nose.

“Be careful, Nancy,” Alice warned. “That chair looks a bit wobbly. I wouldn’t want you falling into the fire.”

“After skiing down Twister today, Nancy can definitely manage a chair,” Dody said pleasantly.

Nancy assured Alice she’d be fine, then reached for the paper. Moments later she was back on the floor, opening it up.

“ ‘Hear ye, hear ye!’ ” she read. “ ‘Ban wild wolves from Wyoming if you ever want to see your tame one again!’ ”

## *On the Brink of Disaster*

“Let me see that!” John thundered, taking the note from Nancy. After reading it, his gray eyes flashed with anger. “This is beyond belief. Someone must have taken Rainbow to make us vote against allowing wolves into Wyoming.”

“That’s so horrible!” Jenny exclaimed. “This person took an innocent mother wolf and her puppies just to win a political issue?”

“But how much power do these guys have?” Nancy asked. “I mean, could someone really get the government to change its mind and ban them?”

“I doubt it,” Paul said, “though some ranchers are suing to make reintroduction illegal. Anyway, Nancy, this note is probably directed at me. Alice, John, and Jenny haven’t been involved with the wild wolf controversy at all. They’re completely neutral. I’m the one who’s been pushing to bring wild wolves back to Wyoming.”

“So you think that this person is trying to manipulate you into changing your mind about relocating wolves here?” Nancy asked Paul.

“Seems that way,” Paul answered. “See, after the government decided to relocate the wolves, I’d go to town meetings to try to get people to accept the idea of wild wolves living in the western states. I wrote a lot of letters supporting this program, and this thief must think my opinion carries weight with people in charge. But the only thing I could really do to affect anything would be to support the ranchers’ lawsuit against the program.”

“If you ask me, the creepiest thing about the note is that the person sneaked in here with it this afternoon,” Jenny said. She gave a little shiver. “I mean, I don’t remember seeing it at lunch. Mom, Dad, and I must have been alone in the house when the person came.”

Nancy had a sudden urge to talk to George and Bess privately about the case. “I’m tired,” she said, throwing them a meaningful look. “I’m going upstairs.”

“Me, too,” Bess and George said in unison. After thanking the Marshalls for dinner, the three girls met in Nancy and George’s room.

“So what do you think so far, guys?” Nancy asked. “I didn’t have a chance to tell you this earlier because Dexter was with us, but Paul had actually been up there on my list of suspects.”

“Really? Why?” Bess asked, eager to know.

Nancy told Bess and George about finding Paul’s letter to his professor, as well as his stun gun and darts. She also mentioned that Paul had been out in the blizzard when Rainbow had vanished. “He claimed he’d been working on the wolf exhibits, but who knows what he’d really been doing,” she finished.

Sitting on the edge of Nancy’s bed, Bess cupped her chin on her hand and said, “You said Paul ‘had’ been up there on your suspect list. Does that mean he’s off the hook now?”

“Well, the note makes me a lot less suspicious of Paul,” Nancy said. “I mean, since he’s always talking about bringing more wolves to Wyoming, why would he hold Rainbow hostage to make the opposite thing come true? He’d be giving his enemies a way by getting rid of wild wolves. That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Here’s what else doesn’t make sense about Paul,” Bess said. “He knows how much Jenny cares about Rainbow, so why would he give his own fiancée all this grief by stealing her pet wolf?”

“He wouldn’t—unless he was a total creep,” Nancy said.

George eyed Nancy thoughtfully. “I just don’t think he did it. I mean, his letter may have hinted that he could have set Rainbow free because he doesn’t believe in taming wild animals. But an animal lover like Paul would know that freeing a tame

wolf in the middle of winter with her five newborn puppies would be much crueler than keeping them as pets.”

“If Paul was really at a town meeting today while the puppies were stolen, he’s probably not guilty,” Nancy said. “I’ll call the town supervisor tomorrow to find out if he was there.”

“Now, what about Rusty?” George said, slipping out of her clogs and sitting cross-legged on her bed. “He’s definitely a weirdo, but is he organized enough to sneak in here and kidnap the wolves?”

“I think he’s guilty,” Bess said firmly. “He seemed totally thrilled to get that Swiss army knife back, and he was a pretty good actor about not letting on that it was his.”

“You know who my number one suspect is now, guys?” Nancy said. “Mr. Ehret.”

“Mr. Ehret!” Bess exclaimed. “Why?”

“A couple of reasons,” Nancy replied. “First, he was hanging out at the top of the chairlift when we got there, and he gave me this really mean look—maybe because he was mad that his plan didn’t work.”

“Plan?” Bess echoed.

“I think he wanted to strand us on the lift,” Nancy explained. “He could have used a cell phone to call the lift operator to say that the people before us were the last ones up. Then he could have cut his phone line so the guy at the bottom couldn’t give out the right information.”

Nancy paused while she rummaged through her drawer for a nightgown. After slipping it on, she added, “But the main reason I suspect Mr. Ehret is the note we just got.”

“Why?” George asked. “Because he’s a rancher, and ranchers are known for not wanting wolves around?”

Nancy nodded. “Just think—Mr. Ehret is a rancher who’s totally against relocating wolves to Wyoming. Maybe he took Rainbow and her puppies to get Paul on his side. I mean, Paul has a high profile about helping endangered wolves, and his opinion might have some influence, especially if he joined the

ranchers' lawsuit. I think we should investigate Thunderbird Ranch—Mr. Ehret's place—tomorrow."

"Okay by me," George said, stifling a yawn. "I don't know about you guys, but I could use some sleep. Tomorrow I want to by Twister."

• • •

Nancy, Bess, George, and Dexter had just finished a delicious pancake breakfast when Paul entered the dining room, sipping a cup of coffee.

"Would anyone like to take a dogsled ride?" he asked, putting down his cup. "The dogs haven't had much exercise lately because we've all been so preoccupied with Rainbow. But I'd like to take them out now. Also, doing something fun might take our minds off Rainbow."

"Nothing will take my mind off Rainbow," Jenny said glumly, picking at her pancakes as she sat slumped at the table. "But I don't want to be a party pooper, so everyone else, please go."

The three girls, Dexter, and Paul reluctantly left Jenny behind while they went to hitch up the dogs outside the barn. As Paul attached the harness, the dogs squirmed with excitement, wagging their tails and licking the humans gleefully.

The sled reminded Nancy of an extra large toboggan. Sitting at the front, Paul held the reins. Nancy and George sat behind him, and Bess and Dexter huddled together way back.

Paul gave the dogs an order to march on, and the sled took off. With Icicle and Grover in the lead, the dogs made a beautiful sight against the snow. Their gray-and-white fur, bright blue eyes, curly tails, and frosty breath gave the huskies a jaunty look as they trotted toward the woods.

Paul steered the dogs down a woodland trail. The morning light streamed through the trees, creating dancing shadows on the snow as a breeze sifted through the branches. "Look, you guys!" he exclaimed, stopping the sled and pointing to some paw prints in the snow. "Guess what kind of animal made these tracks?"

"A wolf?" Dexter asked.

"Nope, a fox," Paul said. "And over here I see some mouse tracks that suddenly end. I'll bet an owl got him."

Bess shuddered. "Boy, life can be tough."

"Especially in the mountains during winter," Paul said, getting back on the sled and commanding the dogs onward. "I'll show you a bear cave in a minute." About a hundred yards later, they arrived at a yawning cavern in a rock face to their right. "There's a bear hibernating in that cave," Paul said. "Don't talk too loud, or you might wake him."

Bess giggled nervously. "I hope you're joking," she whispered.

Soon they were rushing along a cliff. In a ravine far below, a wide creek splashed over frozen rocks. "That's the Elk River," Paul said. "Since it's moving water, it never gets completely frozen. You can't ice-skate on it, but it gives us great rafting and trout fishing during the summer."

As they approached a curve at top speed, Nancy glanced back at Bess to see how she was holding up.

Bess had her eyes shut. "I can't look," she declared.

"It's okay, Bess," Dexter said shyly. He threw his arm around her shoulder and gave it a comforting squeeze.

Paul slowed the dogs, guiding them with the reins as they took the turn. "I take the dogs along this trail all the time," he said. "We're used to it. Nothing's gonna happen."

Paul had hardly finished speaking when his left hand suddenly jerked backward. "Whoa!" he cried. "What happened?"

Nancy saw exactly what had happened. The left rein had snapped off, leaving Paul with a short piece of it in his hand. The rest was flailing in the air, lashing the husky team like a whip.

The terrified dogs moved forward, veering toward the ravine. One dog slipped on loose snow at the edge.

"Get on back up here, Fritz!" Paul ordered, panic in his voice. The dog clawed desperately at the bank to keep from falling.



Paul yanked the one rein he was left with, desperately trying to control the runaway team!

## *Wolf Alert*

The sled teetered on the edge of the cliff as the dog fought to regain his footing. But no matter how hard he struggled, the sled continued to tip toward the ravine. Thirty feet below, the Elk River dashed against ice shards and boulders. Nancy held her breath, expecting to crash onto the rocks at any moment.

“Lean to the right, everybody,” Paul commanded. As everyone obeyed him, he yelled, “Mush, Grover! Mush, Icy! Pull us to safety!” Then he steered the team to the right with his one working rein.

The dogs strained to pull the sled back from the brink as their paws scrambled in the loose snow. With a surge of speed, the dogs leaped forward, tugging at the sled, using every ounce of strength they had.

After a moment of horrifying suspense, the sled inched onto firmer ground. Then the husky team maneuvered the sled along the final few yards of the curve and into the safety of the woods as the trail moved away from the ridge. Once there, Paul stopped the team.

Both huskies and humans took a moment to collect themselves, breathing deep lungfuls of the fresh pine-scented air.

“I wonder if my heart will ever be calm again,” Bess said, patting her chest with a trembling hand.

Paul jumped out of the sled. “I’ve got to figure out what to do about this rein before we go on,” he said soberly.

Nancy joined him, curious to see whether the break in the leather looked deliberate. “Could I take a quick peek at the

rein?" she asked him.

"Sure," he answered, surprise on his face. "Be my guest."

Picking up the rein, Nancy studied the area where the break had occurred. The leather wasn't the least bit worn, she observed, and the cut looked absolutely clean. I don't think this was a natural break caused by wear and tear, she decided, gently fingering the strap.

Nancy handed the rein to Paul, who immediately got to work tying the broken pieces together. After a moment he threw the rein down in frustration. "This is a bust," he grumbled. "I can't tie the leather—it's too stiff. Anyway, I think the strap is just long enough for me to reach it if I lean forward and hold on tight."

Nancy studied Paul as he handled the rein. I really doubt Paul cut it, she mused. He wouldn't endanger himself.

Just to make sure, though, she asked, "By the way, Paul, do you own a stun gun?"

Paul arched an eyebrow at Nancy. "That's an odd question, Nancy. But the answer is, yes, I do. I use my stun gun when I'm relocating wolves. I have to tranquilize the wolf before putting a radio collar on it. Why?"

Nancy shrugged, then fudged an answer. "I just wondered if the thief could have used your stun gun to tranquilize Rainbow and Grover. Maybe it has the person's fingerprints on it."

"I doubt it," Paul said. "I keep my gun upstairs in my drawer, and it definitely hasn't gone missing."

Nancy glanced at Paul's boots. Yes, they are large, she thought, but Rusty wears a similar pair, and Bill Ehret probably does, too. A lot of men who work outdoors in the winter have boots like that, so the tread isn't much of a clue.

Nancy sighed, frustrated at having so few good clues. But as they all sledged back to the lodge, Nancy's mind turned to Bill Ehret. He definitely has a motive for holding Rainbow and her puppies hostage, she thought—he'd love to get Paul to side with him to banish wild wolves from Yellowstone. And, according to

Paul, he even threatened to shoot wild wolves that strayed onto his ranch.

Once they were all safely back at the lodge, the group decided not to tell Alice and John about the sled accident. “It would only worry them,” Paul said, and Nancy agreed. After she’d told Alice about their mishaps at Rusty’s and on the chairlift the day before, Alice had been pretty upset. Nancy didn’t see the point of piling on more bad news.

Nancy also decided to put off calling the town supervisor to see if Paul had an alibi for when the puppies disappeared. After the sled incident, she was positive he was innocent, and she didn’t want to waste any more time investigating the wrong person.

After a delicious lunch of homemade chicken soup and grilled cheese sandwiches on French bread, Nancy motioned to George and Bess to follow her upstairs. Once they’d gathered in her room, she said, “I wanted to talk to you guys in private about Mr. Ehret. I’d really like to check out his ranch. That rein was purposely cut. Whoever did it—maybe Mr. Ehret—is getting dangerous. We’ve got to figure out what’s going on.”

“Whoever took Rainbow probably realizes we’re investigating and wants to get rid of us,” Bess said.

“Probably,” Nancy agreed. “Anyway, maybe if we sneak over to Mr. Ehret’s place this afternoon, we’ll find Rainbow and her puppies there.”

“Could we investigate Mr. Ehret on our way to Elk Mountain, just like we did with Rusty yesterday?” George asked. “I was hoping to get out on the ski slopes today.”

Nancy glanced at the bedside clock. “But it’s already two-thirty, George. I don’t think we’ll have time to do both. What about cross-country skiing to Mr. Ehret’s house? We could ask Jenny if there are trails.”

“Fine by me,” George said happily.

“But let’s not bring along Paul or Dexter,” Nancy said. “I don’t want too many people knowing about our investigation.”

The girls found Jenny in her bedroom, looking mournfully out the window at the winter landscape. “Jenny, you’ve got to cheer up,” Bess said kindly. “Sitting inside and pining for Rainbow isn’t going to bring her back, but coming with us to look for her might.”

Jenny brightened. “Thanks, Bess. I’m really sorry about being so down. I’d like to help you guys if you can think of something for me to do. I’ve just been too upset to think straight.”

Nancy explained that they wanted to check out Bill Ehret and hoped that Jenny could show them the way to his ranch. “Could we cross-country ski over there?” Nancy asked.

“The trail from here to Thunderbird Ranch is too hilly for skiing,” Jenny said, “but we could snowshoe there.” Her blue eyes sparkled. “How about it?”

“Sounds great,” George said eagerly. “Do you have enough snowshoes for all of us?”

After assuring the girls that there were plenty of snowshoes for guests, Jenny led the way to the walk-in equipment closet off the front hall. “I’m glad we’re snowshoeing there instead of driving,” Jenny said, handing out equipment. “We’ll be less obvious.”

“I hope these snowshoes haven’t been tampered with like the reins,” Bess commented, holding up her snowshoes and inspecting them carefully. “But I guess nothing too bad could happen to us even if they were.”

When Jenny asked Bess what she meant, Bess filled her in on the sled adventure. “That’s terrible,” Jenny said, looking shocked. “So someone actually cut that rein. You guys must have been petrified when the sled almost fell off the cliff.”

“I saw my life flash before my eyes,” Bess proclaimed.

George threw her cousin a playful glance. “Hmm, and would that include zillions of hot fudge sundaes and all the cute clothes you’ve ever bought at the mall?”

Bess rolled her eyes at George as they all went outside to attach their snowshoes. Once Jenny had given them a brief

lesson on how to walk in the shoes, she led them toward the gate near the edge of the forest.

“This feels so weird,” Bess exclaimed, lifting up a foot and then thwacking the snow with it. “I feel exactly like Frankenstein.”

“Snowshoeing takes a little getting used to,” Jenny said. “But it makes trekking through deep snow easier.”

Nancy agreed with Bess—her feet felt huge. But after ten minutes on a woodland trail covered with heavy snow, she could tell that Jenny was right. The snowshoes definitely made it easier to move.

As they walked along, they saw the late-afternoon sun throw pink streamers across the sky, which filtered through the trees on their right, turning the snow a rosy gold. To their left the sky had become a deeper blue, with a cream-colored full moon already appearing.

Jenny said, “I love it when the sky is so clear that you can see the moon during the day. The Wyoming wilderness is the most peaceful, beautiful place I know.”

After a few minutes Jenny checked her watch. “Uh-oh—it’s already three-thirty. We’d better hurry, because this time of year it starts getting dark at five. We don’t want it to be dark when we’re coming back.”

Breathing hard, the four girls hurried along the trail. Soon, it opened into a snowy meadow that sloped down a hill. Nancy could feel the wind blowing against her back, ruffling her hair below her woolen cap.

A howl cut the air. Jenny stopped abruptly. Glancing back at the others, she put a finger to her lips. “Wolves!” she whispered.

Nancy looked ahead. Down in the hollow about half a mile away, five grayish brown forms had congregated in a circle, their muzzles pointing toward the sky. A wolf pack.

The howling started again. “That might mean they’re about to hunt for prey,” Jenny murmured.

The girls’ expressions were tense. The wind was blowing downhill, and in seconds the wolves would know the girls were

there!

## *Five Small Clues*

“Don’t panic!” Jenny said in a low voice.

“The thought hadn’t occurred to me,” Bess said dryly. Her hand shook as she pushed a wisp of blond hair under her blue knit cap.

“Do you think the wolves are dangerous?” Nancy asked.

“I don’t know,” Jenny replied. “Wild wolves have never attacked a human, at least as far as anyone knows. But I don’t want to experiment.”

Sniffing the wind, the wolves suddenly turned in the girls’ direction.

“Oh no.” Jenny breathed out in a whoosh, her eyes wide with fear. The biggest wolf had broken out of the circle, leading the rest of the pack as they loped slowly but purposefully toward the girls.

“Take off your snowshoes and get up in that tree!” Jenny ordered, pointing to a large spruce tree beside them.

As the four girls fumbled to undo their bindings, the wolves gained on them. Nancy’s fingers felt stiff and awkward as she tried to work fast, but she could already see the alpha wolf’s tongue hanging from his muzzle and his fierce, determined yellow eyes.

“I can’t get this,” Bess moaned, desperately trying to undo her bindings.

As Nancy leaned over to help Bess, a distant whine filled the air. The girls froze, listening. It instantly grew louder.

About fifty feet away, the wolves stopped, their ears pricked forward.



“What’s that noise?” Bess asked.

“A snowmobile,” Jenny replied.

As the powerful whirl of the snowmobile’s engine deafened them, the wolves skittered backward a few steps. Then, as if they were part of a choreographed dance number, they whirled in unison and fled. Their long, slender legs gracefully leaped over the snow, their paws spraying glistening white crystals.

“They are so cool,” George said above the grinding motor. “And that snowmobile is so obnoxious.”

“But you have to admit, George—it came along at the right moment,” Bess shouted. “Those wolves may be beautiful, but I’m just as happy not to be wolf casserole.”

Seconds later a red snowmobile with a yellow lightning bolt decal on its hood appeared over the rise of the hill and zoomed toward them. Its driver wore a bright orange parka.

As the snowmobile drew closer, the driver abruptly reduced his speed before stopping right next to them in the middle of the trail.

Even though the driver was wearing a helmet and goggles, Nancy recognized Ross Minkowski, the Marshalls’ ranch hand, by his good-natured smile.

Hey, there, Jenny,” he said. “What are you girls doing out here? It’s getting kind of late.”

“I know. I took my friends out snowshoeing this afternoon, but we lost track of the time. We were just about to head home,” she said, “when we saw a pack of wolves.”

“You did?” Ross said. “I know they’ve been relocated to these parts, but I haven’t seen any yet. I hear them howling sometimes from way over the mountain.”

“But what are you doing out here, Ross?” Jenny asked. “Just taking a spin in your snowmobile?”

“Nope, I’ve got work to do,” Ross answered. “I’m on my way over to Thunderbird Ranch. See, Bill Ehret’s ranch hand is down with the flu, and Bill asked me to fill in this evening with the chores. But don’t worry—I haven’t forgotten all our animals at Elk River. I’ll take care of them as soon as I get home.”

“Wow, you’re working hard,” Jenny said.

“A ranch hand’s work is never done, it seems,” Ross said. “But I’d better be going now. I told Bill I’d be at Thunderbird at three o’clock, and I’m nearing an hour late. Anyway, bye for now, and you girls be careful of those wolves.” After giving the girls a friendly salute, Ross revved his motor, then took off in a blast of noise down the trail toward Thunderbird Ranch.

“We are so lucky that Ross came along,” Jenny said. “But what do you guys want to do now? It’s getting late, and there are wolves around. I don’t think we ought to be out in these woods.”

“How far is Thunderbird Ranch?” Nancy asked.

“About a mile and a half,” Jenny said. “But that wolf pack is ahead of us. I’d rather not go on.”

“Okay,” Nancy said reluctantly, disappointed that they were so close. “Then why don’t we drive over to Thunderbird? We were planning to do that at first anyway.”

“Until I pushed for skiing or snowshoeing or whatever,” George said good-naturedly. “But I don’t mind turning back and driving to Thunderbird. I’ll just spend a lot of time outdoors tomorrow.”

Jenny smiled. “Elk Mountain will always be there for you, George. But I really appreciate you guys making Rainbow a priority. Anyway, let’s go home and drive over to Thunderbird. We can park about a hundred yards from Mr. Ehret’s house on the edge of some woods so no one will know we’re there.”

Nancy gave Jenny the thumbs-up sign. As soon as they’d reattached their snowshoes, the four girls headed back to Elk River Ranch.

About forty-five minutes later, Jenny, George, Nancy, and Bess were putting their snowshoes away in the walk-in equipment closet. John stuck his head in the doorway and said, “There you are, Jenny. Would you help me prepare dinner, please? I’ve got a complicated recipe coming up, and I could use another pair of hands.”

“Sure, Dad, let me just finish up here.” Turning back to the girls, Jenny added, “You guys can borrow my Jeep. It’s the old

blue one outside.” She removed a car key from a nail in the closet and handed it to Nancy. “Just promise me you’ll be careful when you get to Thunderbird.”

Before Nancy could answer, the front door burst open and Dody and Dexter entered, stomping off snow on the front doormat. Their faces were flushed from the bracing winter air as they came into the equipment closet carrying their skis. “That was a solid day’s exercise,” Dody said appreciatively. “I only wish you’d joined me in the morning, Dex, instead of going dogsledding. Although dogsledding sounds like fun.”

“Terrifying is more like it,” Dexter said, rolling his eyes. “Anyway, I’m ready for some hot chocolate by the fire and a game of checkers.” His gaze settled eagerly on Bess. “Are you up for hanging out, Bess?”

Bess’s face lit up, then she shot Nancy a questioning look.

“You stay, Bess,” Nancy said. “George and I can go. It’s no problem.”

“Thanks, Nan—if you’re sure,” Bess said. “Well, Dexter, checkers sounds great—do you want to be black or red?”

Five minutes later Nancy and George were driving to Thunderbird Ranch in Jenny’s Jeep. Following the directions that Jenny had given her, Nancy turned right out of the driveway onto the main road. Almost three miles later, they came to a small white clapboard building on their right. On the porch overhang a painted sign with old-fashioned black lettering announced the Elk River General Store.

A bright splash of red came into view from behind the building. “What is that thing?” Nancy asked. “I don’t know why, but it looks familiar.”

She slowed the Jeep to a crawl and peered out of George’s window. A red snowmobile with a yellow lightning bolt decal on the hood was parked at the foot of a trail stretching back into the woods.

“Weird!” George exclaimed. “Isn’t that Ross’s snowmobile?”

“I guess so,” Nancy said, “unless lots of other people around here drive snowmobiles like that one.”

“Well, if it does belong to Ross, I’d sure like to know what he’s doing here,” George said. “Isn’t he supposed to be at Mr. Ehret’s?”

“Maybe he’s on his way home,” Nancy said.

“I doubt it,” George said. “It’s not even five yet. Feeding a bunch of ranch animals would take longer than an hour, I think.”

“There’s only one way of settling this question,” Nancy said as she turned into the small parking area in front of the store. “Let’s go see for ourselves.”

Nancy parked the Jeep alongside a pickup truck, then she and George hopped out. Nancy put a finger to her lips, signaling George to be quiet. “If it is Ross, it’s better if he doesn’t know we’re spying on him,” she explained.

The two girls tiptoed up a small flight of stairs to the porch, then inched open the door. Inside, a tall dark-haired man in an orange parka stood at the counter with his back to them while a teenaged girl rang up his purchases. The girl was glancing at Ross coyly as he chatted amiably with her.

“It’s Ross, all right,” Nancy whispered. “I’m curious to hear what he’s saying.”

Nancy and George crept inside, careful to stay behind a tall rack filled with snack food and candy, so the girl wouldn’t see them and alert Ross to their presence.

Nancy’s gaze fell on the counter, and she stifled a gasp. Spread out in front of Ross were five small dog collars—exactly the number of Rainbows puppies!

## ***Danger Comes Calling***

Nancy stuck out her arm, signaling George to stay back. Then, while Ross was busy flirting with the girl, Nancy and George backed quietly out of the store, careful not to let the door slam behind them.

Once outside, George whispered, "Wow, Nancy. I'll bet Ross was buying collars for the puppies! What do you think?"

"I think we'd better move away from here ASAP, before Ross comes outside and sees us."

"Back to the Jeep, then," George said, moving toward the porch steps.

"No, George, wait!" Nancy said. Grabbing George's arm, she guided her down the steps and around to the back of the store. Then they crouched behind a woodpile. "It's pretty dark now, so I don't think he'll see us here when he comes back to his snowmobile," Nancy commented. "I want to see what direction he goes."

"He'll probably take forever in there, anyway, the way he was flirting with that girl," George declared.

"Let's make a plan," Nancy said. "See, I want to follow him, but he's on his snowmobile and there's no way we'll be able to keep up."

"Then let's get a head start to Thunderbird Ranch in our Jeep," George cried. "I'll bet you anything Ross is taking orders from Bill Ehret. I mean, Ross doesn't seem bright enough to make up a complicated plan like taking Rainbow and her puppies. Why would he want to, anyway?"

“But even if Ross is Mr. Ehret’s lackey, that doesn’t mean he’s keeping the wolves at Thunderbird,” Nancy said. “He could be keeping them in the woods somewhere—like in a cave. Maybe that’s why he’s using a snowmobile instead of a car.”

“The Swiss army knife!” George said suddenly “Those *must* be Ross’s initials on it, but he pretended the knife wasn’t his so the Marshalls wouldn’t find out he’s been sneaking around their house.”

There was a sudden creaking noise behind them. George started, and Nancy cautiously turned her head in the direction of the sound. A grizzled old man with bowed legs and long white hair was sliding open the door of a shed. As the girls watched him, he flicked on an overhead light. Nancy’s heart leaped. Inside, two snowmobiles were parked on a thin covering of icy snow.

George and Nancy traded excited looks.

“Excuse me, sir?” Nancy said as she and George approached him.

The man jumped. But as his watery gaze focused on Nancy and George, he said, “You scared me there, girls. Can I help you?”

“Uh, yes, we’d like to borrow one of your snowmobiles,” Nancy began.

“Eh?” the man said, cupping his hand around an ear. “Speak up, miss. My hearing ain’t what it used to be.”

Nancy repeated her question.

The man looked amused. “What do two nice girls like you want with a snowmobile at this time o’ the evening? It’s twilight, the woods are dark, and I’ve heard there are wolves about.”

“We’ll be fine,” Nancy insisted, “and we won’t be long. We just wanted a chance to ride a snowmobile. Plus, the noise will scare away the wolves.” What if he won’t agree? she thought tensely.

“Oh, all right,” the man said, looking curiously at them. “But you got to pay for it. See, I do a side business of snowmobile rentals, twenty dollars an hour. Can you girls manage that?”

Nancy took out some money from her parka pocket and handed the old man a twenty-dollar bill. After he pocketed it, he showed them how the snowmobile worked, then handed them each a pair of clear goggles.

“Goodbye, now, girls. Be careful. And if you don’t return in one hour, I’ll get worried. So please don’t be doing that to me. Stress and old age don’t mix.” The man hobbled away to a side door of the store and went inside, leaving Nancy and George sitting in the snowmobile with the shed door open and the lights off.

“How much longer do you think Ross’ll be?” George asked.

Nancy had a sudden awful thought. “George—the Jeep. Ross will recognize it for sure. Won’t he think it’s weird that the Jeep is in the parking lot but the Marshalls aren’t around?”

“Probably, but it’s too late now,” George whispered, nudging Nancy in the side as the front door of the store slammed.

Ross’s heavy boots thumped down the porch stairs. Seconds later he appeared around the corner of the building and made a beeline for his snowmobile. After starting it up with a blast of engine power, he revved the motor and took off, heading up a gentle slope toward the trail.

Nancy waited a minute before starting up her engine. “Man, this is loud,” George shouted above the deafening roar of the engine. “I feel as if we’re about to blast off into space or something.”

“At least when you’re on a rocket, you’re going on this awesome adventure,” Nancy yelled back. “I don’t know how Ross stands riding one of these things just to tool around the trails.”

“Still, even though we’re not going into space, speeding through the woods after Ross will definitely be an adventure,” George said, tightening her scarf around her throat. “I can feel it in my bones.”

Following the old man’s instructions, Nancy switched on the headlight, adjusted her goggles over her eyes, and then took off up the trail after Ross.

“I hope he doesn’t hear us,” George said above the engine.

“Me, too,” Nancy said. “I’m hoping he can’t because his snowmobile is so loud, it will drown out ours.”

As twilight deepened into darkness, the cold air cut into the girls’ faces as they zoomed along. With the headlight illuminating the snowy path ahead, Nancy detected fresh snowmobile tracks running along it, but there was no way she could see Ross on the winding, hilly trail in front of her.

Nancy gritted her teeth, listening for the sound of another snowmobile, but she heard only the awful roaring of their own motor.

“He couldn’t be that far ahead,” George shouted. “I can see his tracks.”

Nancy nodded, unwilling to shout too loudly just in case Ross was closer than they thought. After about a mile, the trail met another one, and Nancy stopped. “Now which way?” she asked, peering in both directions. There were snowmobile tracks to the left and right on the new trail.

“I think the tracks look a little fresher to the left,” George said.

“Me, too,” Nancy said, taking the turn. About ten yards later, Nancy added, “Look, George—do you recognize this place?” The headlight lit up a small meadow that inclined down an easy hill. “This is where we saw the wild wolves.”

George sat forward. “Oh, yeah, but I don’t see any critters at all now.”

Nancy dipped into the hollow. Thanks to her powerful headlight, she spotted a wooden footbridge over the Elk River.

As they zoomed across it, George scanned the dark canyon below and said, “I know the river is under us, but I can’t see a thing. It’s as if we’re crossing some creepy void.”

Moments later they entered a narrow trail through some pine trees and headed up a steep hill. The pine forest was so dense that Nancy could barely see to either side of her, but at the top of the hill, the trees thinned out, allowing moonlight to illuminate the landscape. Up ahead, their trail dead-ended into



another one, which ran across theirs like the top of a T. At the junction two painted wooden signs pointed in opposite directions.

With her headlight shining on the signs, Nancy said, “This is weird. The sign pointing left says Thunderbird Ranch, and the one pointing right says Coyote Corners. But the snowmobile tracks head toward Coyote Corners. There aren’t any going to Thunderbird Ranch.”

George gaped at the tracks in the snow. “I can’t believe it. Ross must have gone to Coyote Corners—that’s Paul’s grandmother’s place, right?”

“Yup,” Nancy said. “Ross *must* have gone there, unless there’s a cave or something along here where he’s stashed the wolves.”

Nancy revved the motor, eager to find Rainbow and her puppies. Turning the snowmobile in the direction of Coyote Corners, she roared off down the trail.

It ran along the crest of a hill through a thin forest of pines and deciduous trees. As she put on more speed, Nancy tried not to think about the noisy snowmobile ripping through such a peaceful place. Instead, she focused on the shimmering moonlight and the countless stars in the cobalt blue sky.

After a couple more miles, the trees ended abruptly at a snowy field that rolled down a long, wide hill in a series of gentle drifts. In the valley below, a huge wooden house presided over a remote landscape of meadows, forests, and snow-covered peaks. Yellow lamplight poured from its windows, and smoke curled into the sky from a stone chimney. Two rambling wooden barns stretched out in back, surrounded by a large, fenced-in paddock.

Nancy backed the snowmobile into a cluster of pine trees on the fringe of the forest. Then she cut the motor, and the headlight went off.

The moon bathed the valley in a silvery glow, and Nancy and George had no trouble seeing their way down the hill to the nearest barn. Once there, they slid open a door and peered inside.

Before Nancy's eyes completely adjusted to the dark interior, she was aware of a mass of creatures standing in rows, gently bobbing their heads. When a soft mooing noise broke the silence, George said, "It's just a bunch of cows."

Nancy motioned her inside. "Let's see whether there's a smaller room where Rainbow might be."

An outside floodlight cast a dim glow through the barn windows—enough for the girls to see by. But after several minutes of searching, they'd turned up no clues. "Let's check out the other barn," Nancy suggested, leading the way back outside.

The second barn—filled with horses quietly munching—also yielded no evidence that either Rainbow or Ross had been there.

"What now?" George asked as they stood in the horse barn, frustrated. "The house?"

"You bet," Nancy said. "Even if we can't find Rainbow, Ross must be around—unless we somehow missed him on the trail."

Nancy and George slipped back outside and rounded the corner of the barn toward the house. Then they stopped in surprise.

Ross's snowmobile was parked against the side wall of the barn.

"He's here!" Nancy whispered. "We just couldn't see his snowmobile because the bam was in the way." Nancy gazed toward the house and recognized Mrs. Stevenson's pickup truck parked nearby. "Mrs. Stevenson's here, too," Nancy said, pointing. "If Ross took Rainbow and is keeping her at Coyote Comers, I wonder if Mrs. Stevenson knows."

"Let's go find out," George said, squaring her shoulders as she and Nancy headed toward a side door of the house.

A few moments later, the girls found themselves inside a large, cheery kitchen, where a large pot bubbled on the stove. "Mmm," Nancy whispered. "Something smells really good."

"Lentil soup," George announced, lifting the lid and peering inside. "Boy, am I starved! Are we allowed to take a dinner break?" she joked.

Nancy grinned—and then she heard voices. “Shh, George, someone’s coming!” She pulled George toward a narrow flight of stairs at the rear of the kitchen. Then they dashed upstairs.

The girls found themselves in a spacious hallway decorated with old family portraits, including one of a beautiful young woman with blond hair and turquoise eyes that stared imperiously out at the world. “I bet that’s Mrs. Stevenson,” George said. “She’s gorgeous, but she looks kind of spoiled, if you ask me.”

Nancy’s mind was already leaping ahead to the single closed door off the hallway. “Look, George, all the other doors are open except that one. Let’s check in there first.”

Opening the door a crack, Nancy peeked inside.

A thrill went through her. Rainbow lay in a corner pen, happily nursing her five pups.

Rainbow looked up warily at her two visitors. Just as the girls were about to enter the room, a doorbell rang shrilly through the house.

Nancy and George exchanged startled glances. Footsteps shuffled downstairs, and then the front door creaked open.

“Hello, Stella, my dear!” a man’s voice boomed. “Where is that cute little wolf pup you’ve sold me?”

## *Member of the Pack*

Footsteps hurried upstairs.

“What do we do now?” George asked. “We can’t hide in the bedroom because of Rainbow. She’s probably feeling protective about her puppies.”

“In here, quick!” Nancy murmured, slipping into an adjacent bedroom, where an inside door connected to Rainbow’s room.

Nancy crouched by the keyhole of the connecting door and peered through it. “Oh no!” she cried, drawing back. “Ross is aiming a stun gun at Rainbow.”

Nancy looked again, her body shaking. As she watched Ross’s finger tighten around the trigger, Rainbow suddenly leaped up, baring her teeth as she desperately tried to shield her pups.

Nancy couldn’t stand it another moment. Without thinking of the consequences, she burst through the door and charged at Ross.

Ross was shocked as Nancy ran at him. But before he could react, Nancy lunged forward and karate-kicked his hand.

The stun gun flew out and skidded across the floor. Surprised for only a moment, Ross stalked toward Nancy, punching angrily at the air with clenched fists. “You nosy girl detective!” he growled. “Just wait till I’m through with you.”

There was a flicker of movement behind Ross, and Nancy’s gaze darted in that direction. Standing in the doorway were Stella Stevenson and a man whom Nancy didn’t recognize.

Mrs. Stevenson leaned into the room and grabbed a lamp resting on a night table. With a ferocious tug, she yanked its

electrical cord out of the socket. Then she held the lamp up high. "Don't worry, Ross," she said. "I'm here to back you up."

To Nancy's surprise, George appeared in the hall behind Ross and Mrs. Stevenson. Without even glancing at Nancy, she leaned toward the stranger and whispered in his ear.

Nancy threw George a questioning look. George must have sneaked around through the hallway door so Ross and Mrs. Stevenson wouldn't see her, Nancy guessed. But what was she whispering to that man?

The man's face turned pale as he stared at George, aghast. Then he turned and bolted out of view.

Ross's fist shot toward Nancy's shoulder, and her attention swung back to him. He aimed another punch, and she scrambled backward, tripping over the edge of a rug.

As Nancy stumbled to the floor, her gaze flew to Mrs. Stevenson. The old lady ran at her, the porcelain lamp held high. A second later Mrs. Stevenson whipped the lamp down toward Nancy's head.

Nancy ducked, putting up her hands to shield herself. She knew she didn't have time to get out of the way. Crouching, her hands curled over her head, Nancy expected to feel sharp porcelain biting into her skin at any second.

Nothing happened, though. Nancy glanced up to see George grabbing the lamp in midswing. With a firm twist, George yanked it out of the old lady's clawlike hands.

"Thank you, George!" Nancy cried, springing to her feet. Without wasting a moment, Nancy karatekicked Ross hard. He fell to the floor, clutching his stomach and gasping for air.

"You knocked the wind out of him, you horrible girl!" Mrs. Stevenson cried.

Ross sat up and glared murderously at Nancy from under thick, dark brows. Then he staggered to his feet, charging her like a football tackle.

An ominous growl erupted. Cowering in front of her puppies, Rainbow barked, her long sharp white teeth bared at Ross as he approached Nancy. "She's warning you to lay off," George said.

“As if I care!” Ross snarled. But he stopped and looked at the mother wolf warily, with a mixture of annoyance and grudging respect.

Mrs. Stevenson suddenly dipped to the floor and snatched something from under a chair. “The game is over!” she crowed, triumphantly brandishing the stun gun.

Before Nancy and George could react, Mrs. Stevenson had the gun jabbed against Nancy’s neck. “Don’t worry, my dear. We’re going to take a little walk.” She spoke softly, in the same tone a grandmother might use to soothe a child. “You and your friend are coming down the stairs with me.”

“Move it, Nancy!” Ross commanded. “Listen to the lady! Out of the room, now. And your friend, too. What d’ya say her name was—George? That’s no name for a girl.” He chuckled snidely.

“Mind your own business,” Nancy said, but she raised her arms in surrender as Mrs. Stevenson kept the gun pressed against her neck.

“You, too, George dear,” Mrs. Stevenson said in the same falsely gentle tone she had used before, “because if you don’t, I’ll shoot your friend with a dart.”

Nancy flinched at the cold metal against her neck as Mrs. Stevenson and Ross marched her and George into the hall. Nancy remembered that Mrs. Stevenson had arthritis and couldn’t always control and coordinate her movements. I hope she doesn’t fire this thing by mistake, Nancy thought grimly.

Ross closed the door on Rainbow and her puppies before helping Mrs. Stevenson usher the girls downstairs. Once there, Mrs. Stevenson lowered the gun.

“I’ve decided not to risk tranquilizing you unless you misbehave,” Mrs. Stevenson said. “See, I’ve arranged a little meeting for you girls, and I’d rather have you be awake to enjoy it.” To Ross, she ordered, “Put these kids in the cave so they won’t meddle with my plans again.”

“The bear cave?” Ross asked, shocked. “Yup,” Mrs. Stevenson said gleefully. “If the hibernating bear doesn’t get them, they

will starve. Now get the rope, Ross, and don't let me see any signs of sympathy from you."

"Yes, Mrs. Stevenson," Ross muttered as he sidled over to a chest of drawers. After rummaging in it for a moment, he returned with a length of rope and started to bind Nancy's and George's hands behind them.

"So whose idea was it to steal Rainbow and her puppies?" George asked as Ross worked away.

Nancy shot George a curious look. She's obviously trying to stall them, Nancy thought, because Mrs. Stevenson already hinted it was her idea.

"Of course it was my idea," Mrs. Stevenson said grandly. "I thought of the plan because wolfdog breeds fetch high prices—much higher than most dog breeds."

Nancy frowned, gazing around at the grand old house with its opulent furniture. "But why would you need the money?" she asked. "Because my husband recently died, and he left a bit of his money to his kids from an earlier marriage," Mrs. Stevenson explained. She narrowed her eyes, as if pained by the thought of any of her inheritance going to someone else. "I must admit I have plenty of money for the basics—my beautiful house, clothes, jewelry, furs, restaurant dinners, fine wines, and trips to Europe. But I have my heart set on something more, and I couldn't make my money stretch far enough for it."

"What could be better than going to Europe and owning a beautiful house?" George asked.

"An African safari," Mrs. Stevenson said. "They're terribly expensive, you know."

"So you stole a mother wolf and her defenseless puppies just so you could go on a trip?" Nancy asked.

Mrs. Stevenson waved her hand dismissively. "I was planning to return Rainbow to John and Alice after the puppies were weaned. I only wanted Rainbow so she could nurse them."

"But just because you were going to return her doesn't make stealing her okay," George said. "Plus, you took the puppies for good, and you put the Marshalls through all this grief."

Mrs. Stevenson sighed. "They'll get over it."

"Don't you care about your grandson's feelings?" Nancy asked. "He was upset about the missing wolves, too."

"Paul will never know I masterminded this plan, because you and George won't be around to tell him," Mrs. Stevenson said. "He'll still love me as much as he ever did."

George and Nancy traded shocked glances. I can't believe how totally selfish Mrs. Stevenson is, Nancy thought.

"I have a question," George said to Ross as he finished tying her hands. "Why didn't you take the puppies the same night you stole Rainbow?"

"Because I only had time to grab Rainbow before Jenny ran into the room," Ross explained. "By the way, you girls almost caught me with the puppies after I'd just snatched them. They were hidden in my truck while I went into the barn to get my keys. I was about to drive them over here."

"So when did you lose your Swiss army knife?" Nancy asked.

"The night before I took Rainbow," Ross replied. "See, I came in that night to kidnap her and the puppies, but she and Grover barked when they saw me, so I realized I'd have to tranquilize them. I was sneaking around the house, looking for Paul's room. I knew he had a stun gun. But then I saw a light under one of the bedroom doors, and I decided my plan was too risky. So I borrowed Mrs. Stevenson's stun gun the next day." He shrugged, adding, "My pocket had a hole in it, and my knife must have dropped out."

"Did you fix the chairlift so we'd get stuck?" George asked.

"I did indeed," Ross said proudly "I called the lift operator on my cell phone and told him that the last occupied chair was number fifty—about thirty chairs before yours. Then I cut the phone wire so his partner couldn't set him straight. I was hoping Nancy might freeze and butt out of my business."

"But how did you know I was investigating the case?" Nancy asked.

"That's a good one!" Ross exclaimed. "See, Mrs. Stevenson learned you were investigating the case from Paul. Of course,



Paul didn't realize that his grandmother was the last person he should have given that information to."

"The Marshalls were blabbing about your wonderful detective work, and he overheard," Mrs. Stevenson explained.

George shot Ross a level look. "So did you mess up the dogsled harness?" she asked.

"I cut the rein," Ross admitted. "I cut it so it would snap when you guys went out. You were all getting to be nuisances—investigating here, snooping around there—and I wanted you out of the way. I knew it was only a matter of time before you found us out."

"What about the note on the elk's antler? Did you write it?" Nancy asked.

Ross frowned. "What note? What antler? I don't know what you mean. You can't blame everything on me."

Nancy studied Ross's eyes, which looked completely blank. I think he's telling me the truth, she decided.

"Enough of this chitchat," Mrs. Stevenson snapped, taking aim with the stun gun again. "It's getting late, and you girls have a date with a bear."

Mrs. Stevenson and Ross marched the girls outside. But as they began to walk toward the woods, a siren suddenly blared from out of nowhere.

Everyone jumped and immediately turned toward the noise.

A police car was peeling up the driveway, its red lights flashing. As everyone froze in the headlights, it screeched to a stop. Four police officers jumped out.

"Stella Stevenson and Ross Minkowski, you're under arrest for kidnapping and assault!" the first officer announced. "Don't argue with me. The evidence of your crime is right before my eyes." He nodded toward Nancy's and George's bound hands and the stun gun that Mrs. Stevenson still held against Nancy's neck.

Mrs. Stevenson lowered her gun, the fire suddenly ebbing from her fierce blue eyes. "I just don't want Paul to know about me," she murmured.

“Then you shouldn’t have committed a crime,” the officer retorted as he handcuffed his two prisoners. Meanwhile, another officer cut the ropes on the girls’ wrists.

Once free, Nancy and George thanked the officers profusely for rescuing them. Shaking her wrists to get the blood circulating again, Nancy turned to George and said, “I have a sneaky feeling you’re hiding information from me, Fayne—like, who alerted the police?”

George grinned. “Remember the man who showed up to buy the puppy? I told him that Rainbow and her litter were stolen property and to call the police immediately. Luckily, he was a good guy, and he believed me.”

“Luckily is right,” Nancy breathed. “If it hadn’t been for him, we would have been bear food.”

“Yeah,” George said. “I love animals, but I sure don’t want to cater to them.”

Nancy rolled her eyes at George’s joke before borrowing a police cell phone to telephone the Marshalls with the good news.

• • •

Later that evening everyone staying at Elk River Ranch had gathered around Rainbow, Grover, and their puppies in John and Alice’s suite after Paul and Jenny had fetched the animals home.

“I’d be one hundred percent happy if I weren’t so upset about Grandma,” Paul said soberly. “I had no clue about her plan, or that she was even capable of it. Yes, she *is* spoiled and selfish, but stealing wolves and attacking people?” He shook his head glumly, unable to say anything more.

Bess broke the silence. “There’s one thing that I still don’t get. Who wrote the note on the elk’s antler?”

Dody Warriner cleared his throat, looking horribly embarrassed as he blurted, “I have a confession. My good friend Bill Ehret asked me to put the note on the elk’s antler. If I’d known it was a threatening note, I never would have done him that favor.”

“Why did he want to threaten us like that?” Alice asked, her face clouding over.

“It’s complicated,” Dody explained. “See, when I scolded Bill later about the note, he told me he was just trying to get Paul on his side about the wolf issue. Bill’s worried sick about his livestock’s safety with the new wolf packs roaming around, and he’s especially concerned about having a wolf sanctuary so close to his ranch. I think he feels desperate. But I’m sorry if I caused any of you pain. I really didn’t know what the note said.”

Alice smiled. “Don’t worry, Dody. We believe you.”

With a sigh of exasperation, Dexter said, “You trust everyone too much, Dad. You should have read his note first.”

Paul said, “Well, I’m hoping Bill Ehret won’t feel desperate for much longer. The moment I learned that he hadn’t taken Rainbow, I called him to arrange a friendly meeting. Tomorrow we’re going to sit down together at Thunderbird Ranch to try to hash out a compromise between the Montrose ranchers and the needs of my wolf sanctuary. Bill’s eager to talk. I have a feeling we can work something out.”

“That’s great news,” Jenny said, elated.

Paul smiled at Jenny, then looked back at Alice and John. “But the best news of all is that Jenny and I have set a wedding date. How does June fourth sound?”

“Lovely,” Alice said, beaming.

“What a romantic day it’s been,” Bess gushed, with a sideways glance at Dexter. “First, Rainbow and Grover are reunited, and now Jenny and Paul have a wedding date.”

“Speaking of Rainbow,” Alice said, “let’s all give three cheers to Nancy for her brilliant detective work. Thank you so much, Nancy. Rainbow and the puppies wouldn’t be here now if it hadn’t been for you.”

Nancy smiled, shooting a glance at Rainbow, who was staring at her placidly with her mysterious golden eyes. On a whim, Nancy reached down cautiously to pat her for the first time, and Rainbow didn’t flinch. Gently removing one of the puppies from the pen, Nancy lifted it to her lap. As she stroked its soft baby

fur, Nancy said, “I love it that Rainbow trusts me with her puppy. It’s as if she’s thanking me, in her own wolflike way.”

“Now you’re an official part of her pack,” Bess said, and grinned.

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